Interpreted Identities

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Exploring the Development of (male) Homosexual Presentation in American Drama

By

Kari Hauge

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INTRODUCTION

With the title "Interpreted Identities" I refer to how individuals tend to be read into categories of identities based on the idea that we constitute seemingly coherent features of sex, gender, and sexuality, and how individuals who deviate from this coherent norm, such as homosexuals, become interpreted as Other or deviant. My objective is to see how (male) homosexuality is presented in three American plays written in different historical contexts, to see whether the presentation of homosexuality develops positively, i.e. in a way that proves liberating. Moreover, the title is inspired by Judith Butler's observations about sexuality, gender and identity as culturally produced, heterosexist concepts. In Gender Trouble, she asks:

> To what extent do regulatory practices of gender formation and division constitute identity, the internal coherence of the subject, indeed, the self-identical status of the person? (…) Inasmuch as "identity" is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of "the person" is called into question by the cultural emergence of those "incoherent" or "discontinuous" gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined.[1]

What Butler refers to here, is that the "coherence" of the individual is culturally produced and socially instituted so as to maintain the normal/deviant binary according to a heterosexist axis. In this thesis, these "incoherent" persons are male homosexuals. To explore how (male) homosexuality is presented and if homosexuality has been increasingly liberated since the mid 20th century then, I look for signs of essentialism in the sexuality/gender/identity articulations in the three texts because I maintain that when homosexuality is seen as a fixed category of identity, it will only limit liberation. This view is of course in Queer spirit; my arguments against essentialism and for un-fixed categories of identity will be based on Queer theorists throughout the thesis. Although their arguments will be explained briefly when being used, I find it useful to introduce the main thoughts of Queer theory and the Queer thinkers Michel Foucault and Judith Butler here. Moreover, as I attempt to argue against essentialist views found in the texts and earlier Sexuality/Gender studies, I find it useful to include briefly the theoretical development in gender/sexuality studies towards Queer theory as well.
The topic of this thesis (exploring the development of (male) homosexual presentation in

[1] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 23.

American drama), is arrived at, as mentioned, from a wish to explore whether there is noticeable in the plays a liberation in the presentation of homosexuality that is assumed to have happened since the middle of the 20th century. I use the Stonewall Riots of 1969 as the historical milestone to compare the three plays, as this historical event marks a significant shift in the presentation of homosexuality towards liberation. The plays are selected accordingly, being written at different times in relation to this event: Edward Albee's 1962 play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* was written *before* Stonewall, Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band*'s debut will be read as occurring *at* Stonewall, and finally, Tony Kushner's two-part play *Angels in America* is written in 1991/1992 and set in 1985, well *after* Stonewall. I will get back to the historical context below. First, I find it necessary to explain the theoretical basis for how I am to explore the presentation of homosexuality in the plays.

Theoretical Basis

My attempt is not to suggest a solution to how one should represent homosexuality; it is rather to explore how homosexuality and identity are depicted in the three plays in order to find out if there has been a liberating development. My notion of a liberating presentation includes, as mentioned, a move away from the notion of fixed, self-evident identity categories, into an understanding of the subject as polymorphous and not merely a sexual or gendered being. As my viewpoint is in queer spirit, my methodology is based on a Butlarian queer and post-modern view of sexuality and identity. As I read the drama as text, and not as theatre performances, this queer view will be applied to close reading of the three plays.

The first challenge to presenting homosexuality in a liberating fashion, I find to rest on the binary conception of sex and gender. As Chris Beasley notes, "'gender' typically refers to the social process of dividing up people and social practices along the lines of sexed identities"[2]. This division of gender refers to a binary division in Western society where the two categories are distinct and polarized as opposites, as masculine and feminine/male and female. The categories are also considered opposites: "to be a man is to be a not-woman and vice versa".[3] As I will argue throughout the thesis, this binary opposition works to limit the opportunities for diversity when it comes to identity. Importantly, this concerns both heterosexuals and homosexuals. Because when personal attributes are seen as constituting a person's sexed identity based on this binary opposition, little room is left for effeminate

[2] Chris Beasley, *Gender & Sexuality: Critical Theories, Critical Thinkers* (London: SAGE Publications, 2005), 11.
[3] Beasley, *Gender & Sexuality*, 12.

heterosexual males, buthch females, not to mention masculine homosexual men. What my discussion of Albee's play will show, is that only when we are able to challenge these conception of binary gender divisions, can we begin to see how essentialist views of gender and sexed identities work to repress individuals and opportunities for more variously gendered ways of being.

The second challenge to presenting homosexuality then, is the popular reliance, especially in earlier sex and gender studies, on sex and gender as constituting truths that are seen as essential and interior of the Self, and that these truths produce identity categories symmetrical to gender and sexual desire. As my discussion of Albee's play also will show, socially inscribed identity categories are based on an assumption of essentialism and constructed within a binary system. For homosexuals then, this means that they will be seen as deviant from the norm where the category of "man" (i.e. biologically born *male*) is presumed to *desire women*, and to have certain personal characteristics that are deemed *masculine*. And similarly, "woman" (i.e. biologically born *female*) is presumed to *desire men*, and to have certain personal characteristics that are deemed *feminine*. When categories of identity are seen as self-evident and unchanging like this, the homosexual male will be seen as deviant from his biological category of "man" and thus become identified with the category of "woman". The biological body does not necessarily materialize a masculine social identity – or a personal identity that is considered masculine. In this sense, using gender as an analytic tool proves important in that it helps challenge biological determinism and essentialism. Because repeating binary conceptions and essentialist categorizations includes confirming that there are only two ways of being which amount to fixed core "essences" associated with being a woman or a man.[4]

Thirdly, the development of sex/gender studies after Stonewall marks an important problem for the presentation of homosexuality. As I will explain below, the late sixties and seventies saw the rise of Gay Liberation, and a 'sexual revolution' that included a liberation agenda that wanted to overthrow power and make visible homosexuality as a natural, but currently repressed sexuality at the core of the 'true' self.[5] Gender and sexuality theory in general has accordingly been criticised for their tendencies in the 70s and 80s to focus too much on gender as a singular identity or category of unity. With this unitary focus on identity, although intended as liberating, also followed a strong focus on marginal group identities and

[4] Beasley, *Gender & Sexuality*, 57.
[5] Beasley, *Gender & Sexuality*, 121.

thus on the difference between male and female genders, and homo and hetero sexualities.[6] As I will argue in my discussion of Crowley's play in Chapter Two, highlighting difference in this way and maintaining the unity of the male homosexual category, only helps to maintain the binary conception of sex and gender and the assumed coherent categorizations of identity. The aim with focusing on unity during these decades was to make visible the marginalized in society as a strong, coherent group and thus ensure liberation by seeking emancipation and recognition.[7] As I also will argue in my discussion of Crowley's play however, although these strategies did prove politically efficient to achieve some social and legal recognition, it arguably also ensures maintenance of the binary conception of gender and identity, and thus the marginalized will only be recognized as such. I will argue that no true liberation can occur based on these concepts, because homosexuals will always already be marked as deviant without challenging the socially construed image of identity as deriving symmetrically from an internal essence of truth.

Michel Foucault offers an important critique of this framework of difference. He doubts the efficacy of marginalized groups that maintain an activism of identity politics. For as he warns, we should pay close attention to the identity categories that are established by such activism as well, as they tend to merely offer a resistance to power through promoting a new sexual truth that works by the same social practises that announce normative structures of exclusion and selection. Rather then, we should attempt to deconstruct these "truths", not copy their structures.[8] Influenced by Foucault's ideas then, the theoretical direction in Gender and Sexuality studies developed during the late 70s and 80s from identity politics that emphasised a minority model of homosexuals under a supposedly inclusive and liberating banner of *homosexual identity* to a more deconstructive approach. By the late 80s, frustration with categories of identity had increased, and the limitations of the supposedly liberating and inclusive sexual identities of gays and lesbians were questioned. As the father of this deconstructive approach to categories of identity, Foucault deconstructs and denaturalizes dominant conceptions of sexual identity, so that they come to be seen as being historical products, regulated by social practices.[9] This deconstructive approach to the identity and gender/sexuality discussion includes exploring how gender, sexuality and identity are categories that are produced through social power structures, such as discourse. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault defines discourses as social practices that systematically

[6] Beasley, *Gender & Sexuality*, 20.
[7] Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 34.
[8] Beasley, *Gender & Sexuality*, 165.
[9] Beasley, *Gender & Sexuality*, 165.

constitute the subject matters they seemingly only describe or address.[10] This includes that our conceptions of the coherence of identity categories based on sexuality or gender are regulated, produced, and maintained by social discourses. This notion will be taken into account largely in Chapter Two. Here, I will also use Foucault's idea of the reproduction of discourse to see if the characters' very open communication is merely a reproduction of heterosexist discourse.

This deconstructive turn marks the development within sex and gender studies towards Post-modern approaches that challenge the binary and essentialist mechanisms behind identity construction. This theoretical approach is often referred to as the queer turn in gender and sexuality studies. Accordingly, within Queer theory, identity is not seen as a core within the self but as being constituted and made normal or deviant not through its inherent difference or similarity to dominant and hetero-normative society, but through power structures that withhold this dominance and repress individuals who come to be seen as different from the norm. This also includes a critique of any fixed categories of identity, be it that of dominant WASP categories or marginal categories of sex or gender. Queer then proclaims its distance from identity politics favoured by earlier gender/sexuality studies, and rather challenges the notion of unitary identity as in "gay" or "straight" and rejects binary construction, such as gay/straight or man/woman. The Queer and Post-modern aim is to show the self as incoherent and unstable, to demonstrate how social discourse involves a fixing of meanings, which also includes the self.[11] With Kushner's depiction of what I will call a First Person Plural, for example, this development becomes very present in his play. His gay characters are presented with inconsistent gender roles and thus he presents gender confusion within the subject itself, in his move to constitute plural individuals and diversity in society. Importantly, this development worked to focus on several differences, multiplicity of genders and incoherent identities instead of group unity. It placed doubt on the assumed self-evidence of any identity category, including that of the homosexual male. In addition to this, the queer turn meant a move away from identity politics as a whole. Instead, the focus was on deconstructing binary structures and to challenge essentialism and fixed identities.[12]

In this context, Judith Butler figures as an important theorist. Her disavowal of any "prediscursive" notion of gender or identity leads her to argue for identity as an act rather than an essential core. In *Gender Trouble* she shows how gender does not express any essential

[10] Foucault explained in Ellen Mortensen, Cathrine Egeland, Randi Grassgård, ed., et al., *Kjønnsteori*, (Oslo: Gyldendal Akademiske Forlag, 2008), 70.
[11] Beasley, *Gender & Sexuality*, 164-5.
[12] Beasley, *Gender & Sexuality*, 100.

truth of the Self. Butler provides an important critique of essentialist concepts of identity, when she challenges the concept of biological sex/gender. This concept suggests that we are born either men or women, and that this has significance for our identity or sense of self. Butler criticises this view and argues for biological sex/gender as a discursive category, which accordingly does not point to any internal "truth" or prediscursive essence of the self – it is merely a product of discourse.[13]

Inspired by the work of Foucault, Butler also shares his view on the relationship between discourse and power. According to both of them, power operates discursively, both as regulating and producing social practices. When sexuality and identity are discursively regulated, it also produces intelligible forms of sexuality and gender, which are based on compulsory heterosexuality. Accordingly, other forms of sexuality and gender, such as the homosexual, come to be seen as unintelligible – as deviant.[14] To challenge what she refers to as the heterosexual regime, Butler seeks to find new ways of describing sexual and gender identity and so she articulates gender as something "performative". Opposite to traditional belief, she maintains, gender is not something we are (not our essential, prediscursive truth) but something we do (something we perform through a repetition of acts that is recognized as gender). The fact that we are conceived as belonging and acting according to a certain gender, leads us to concretize what is really a fictional category, i.e. a category that is historically and discursively created.[15] To use Kari Jegersedt's example:

> Our actions or performances as genders, bring into the world what they constitute. And as a result, we materialize the law, in the same way as when a bride and groom materialize the social and cultural practice that makes it possible to achieve a new identity when they say "I do" in a marriage ceremony.[16]

With Butler's argument that gender is performative, she also deconstructs the boundary of biological gender (sex) vs. the social gender (gender). Rather than considering the biological gender to be the primary factor constituting the gender norms, she argues that social gender, i.e. the way we perform male and female, to be the primary gender marker. The social gender is primary, and creates the illusion that there is a biological gender that is more natural, and thus constitutes a sense of interior "essence" which the exterior performances of gender mimic.[17]

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[13] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, preface.
[14] Mortensen, *Kjønnsteori*, 75.
[15] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxiii.
[16] Mortensen, *Kjønnsteori*, 77. (my translation).
[17] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 231-232.

In accordance with the post-modern move away from identity politics then, Butler's idea of gender as performative allows for a displacement of the norms of identity categories. But because she claims that there is no prediscursive, pre-existent truth of the self, these repetitions are enacted as though copying an original, an original that in fact does not exist. And accordingly, identity becomes a fantasy, and by acknowledging this, we can act differently to disrupt this power-system, so that the presumed core can be read differently, without adhering to the norm. In all three plays, the notion of performativity becomes interesting in how homosexuality is presented. In Albee's play, I will argue that George is able to retrieve his masculinity because he is able to act male; to enact a certain gender role so as to be recognized as masculine. Crowley's characters however, perform feminine, and thus reproduce the binary distinction of hetero, masculine v. homo, feminine. In Kushner's play however, Belize is a former drag queen, and thus a representation of the subversive potential of performativity. In addition, Kushner comments on performativity as a disruptive tool to binary gender system with his double-casting.

In relation to the fact that Queer theory has been criticised for being too fluid, Butler has been criticised for neglecting the role of the material body in identity formation.[18] She insists that the body is also gendered performance which is socially and discursively constituted as the essence of gender.[19] This analysis includes a challenge to the idea of the anatomical or biological body as a universal truth, existing outside of culture, but it does not insist that the body is insignificant. Her analysis rather makes clear how the body should not be read as signifying any symmetrical truth when it comes to gender identity or sexual identity, but that the body is just as much culturally produced and should therefore be read as the site for where performance and cultural conception of identity takes place. As we will see in Chapter Three, Kushner's play makes the debate of the signifying economy of the body visible. In line with Butler's argument, the body gains importance for the characters' self-conceptions and is shown as vital to the changes the characters go through. Opposing the critique that Butler neglects the importance of the material body then, we will see how in Butler's slightly more positive rendering of the individual as a more active agent than Foucault argues, (and which I will argue as too negative in Chapter Two), the body can act differently and subversively, and so power structures can be, if not overthrown, destabilized.

[18] Abigail Bray and Claire Colebrook, "The Haunted Flesh: Corporeal Feminism and the Politics of (Dis)Embodiment," *Signs* 24:1 (Fall 1998): 38.
[19] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 98.

Queer sexuality and gender studies also focus on what becomes abject or devalued or repressed within these binaries to illustrate their fabricated otherness.[20] Significant to this concern, the publication of Butler's *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* coincided with the AIDS crisis in the USA. At this time, the debates around the epidemic raged, and many people felt the disease was not taken seriously by politicians, as it primarily affected homosexuals. When Butler writes about how abject bodies are produced then, this context becomes important. She explains how by thinking the body as material, we can avoid traditional way of describing the body in terms of something prediscursive or essential, and rather describe how regulative social practices determine what bodies become intelligible and valued, and what bodies become unintelligible and abject.[21] In this case, homosexual and sick bodies are abject, and unintelligible next to their normative opposites: heterosexual and healthy. Unlike many of his contemporaries though, Kushner does not try to write a melodramatic play which only focuses on how its characters deal with their sickness. Neither does his play fall in the category of pure comedy, satirizing the political handling of the AIDS crisis. What I will argue instead, is that Kushner's AIDS drama is radical because he is able to write about homosexuality and AIDS without falling into a heterosexist language. He illuminates the normalizing AIDS discourse, seen as "a bad dream the world is having" rather than merely showing the harsh reality of the crisis.

As I will argue that a presentation of homosexuality that derives from an essentialist, binary or unitary understanding of sex, gender and identity is a negative one, Crowley's play will be argued as providing an insufficient liberation in its presentation of homosexuality. In the wake of Queer theory, his play can be said to reproduce instead of disrupting these heterosexist notions, and thus not be able to create viable identities for its characters. Albee on the other hand, although writing the play long before the emergence of Queer theory, is able, to a much larger extent than Crowley, to challenge coherent and essentialist norms of sexuality, gender and identity. Finally, Kushner's play will be argued as presenting homosexuality in queer terms, and thus ensure a liberating view on identity. Even though I maintain that a liberating presentation of homosexuality includes a queer approach to gender, sexuality and identity, I am aware of its weaknesses, and of the criticism directed at Queer theory. The Queer approach is now predominant within gender and sexuality studies, and, I will argue, within Kushner's play as well. Consequently, I find it is useful to include briefly some comments on this criticism.

[20] Beasley, *Gender & Sexuality*, 163.
[21] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 2-3.

One weakness often found in criticism of Queer theory, concerns the notion that it can be said to concentrate in an exclusive manner on sexuality as *the* identity marker, despite its claim to the instability of all categories.[22] I argue that Kushner resists this critique by including polymorphous selves that are presented as different between and *within* themselves, and with multiple sources for identity and self-conception. Secondly, Queer theory has also been criticised for being associated almost entirely with non-heterosexuality. Some queer theorists claim that heterosexuality, as a sexual identity, may be queer along the same lines as any other identity. Others however, claim that due to the heterosexual's already privileged position, it should not be included in the Queer agenda, because this might then lead to less political efficacy for the unprivileged.[23] As I will argue in Chapter Three though, legitimizing some identities in this manner is unhelpful and including the heterosexual is vital in my opinion, to show the universally beneficial effect of queering identity. And Kushner does this through his inclusion of *all* individuals in his quest for a queer(ing) tomorrow.

Finally, some criticise Queer theory for continuing categorization. As we have seen so far, a queer approach involves theorizing a multiplicity of sexualities and the rejection of singular or fixed identities. Arguably though, it is questionable if the queer that replaces fixed categories does not become an identity category of its own. While Jagose claims that "its non-specificity guarantees it against recent criticism made of the exclusionist tendencies of gay and lesbian as identity categories", others are less convinced.[24] If *Queer* becomes a noun that is characterized by fluidity, changeability, resistance and non-normativity, it still works by exclusion, and is marked by certain characteristics, and thus becomes yet another identity category. In relation to this, Queer theory has been criticised for holding too fluid notions of identity, and is not somehow outside of the boundaries of hetero-normative labels and identity distinctions.[25] But as I will argue in the third Chapter, the AIDS agenda and Butler's *Bodies that Matter* contest this criticism, as they show the necessity of a corporeal politics of identity, which Kushner also affirms. This is also why I prefer the verb form of queer, as it avoids becoming a fixed category and rather becomes a performance or an activity. As will become clear with my discussion of Kushner's play, the verbal use of Queer offers more possibility for the future. A "queering" rather than a "queer" future can maintain a constant, active oppositional stand towards normative social practices, without being defined as a category of identity.

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[22] Beasley, *Gender & Sexuality*, 168.
[23] Beasley, *Gender & Sexuality*, 170
[24] Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 76.
[25] Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 101.

History

I have chosen the primary texts based on my wish to explore the *development* of the presentation of homosexuality in American drama. To be able to explore this development, I use the 1969 Stonewall Riots as my historical milepost. The Stonewall Riots become very useful as such, because of their historical significance. It has become the epitomized historical event for crucial changes within gender and sexuality theory, as well as in the political history of gay liberation. The event is now recognized as the moment which saw the emergence of "gay identity" and as an important marker of homosexual liberation.[26] I therefore find it useful to analyze plays published before and after the Stonewall riots, to find out if this transition is noticeable in American drama (written by and about homosexuals) as well. The first play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* opened in 1962, when America was recovering from the paranoid McCarthy era, and homosexuals faced a legal system and a society highly homophobic. The second play, Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band*, opened in 1968. It will be read as capturing the juxtaposition of a repressed past inside the closet, and an emerging "gay identity" that was out and proud, and thus as positioned "At" Stonewall. The last play, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* was written in 1991/1992, but is set in 1985. It's context is interesting as it illustrates the political and popular development in homosexual presentation after Stonewall, but it also shows the difficulty of presenting homosexuality in the time of AIDS. As noted, Stonewall is generally seen as marking a major shift in the representation of homosexuality both politically and culturally. And so due to my aim to explore the development of how homosexuality is presented, it becomes important to include a brief summary of this historic event, and the political events leading up to and emerging from it.

Although gay sub- cultures proliferated in America during the 1950s, the onset of the Cold War and anti-communist panic assured that not only communists, but homosexuals and any individual who did not conform to the hetero-normative image, met oppression from various fields, such as religion, medicine, and the law.[27] In McCarthyist spirit, homosexuals faced an anti-homosexual stance from the national government, and police harassment and bar

[26] William Scroggie, "Producing Identity: From *The Boys in the Band* to Gay Liberation," in *The Queer Sixties*, ed. Patricia Juliana Smith (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 13.
[27] Stephen Engel, "Making a Minority: Understanding the Formation of the Gay and Lesbian Movement in the United States," in *Handbook of Lesbian & Gay Studies*, ed. Diane Richardson and Steven Seidman (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 380.

raids increased dramatically in the 1950s.[28, 29] This did not mean that homosexuals were not politically active during this decade though. The Mattachine Society formed in 1951 in Los Angeles was the first organization in what would become the Homophile Movement. With Harry Hay as their leader, a small group of gay left-wing men (some were self-claimed communists) formed this organization with the aim to create a collective homosexual identity in order to advocate a group consciousness needed to seek status as a legitimate minority with demands for civil rights. Interestingly though, this notion became unpopular amongst homosexuals in the period between the mid fifties to 1969, but was, as we will see in Chapter Two, picked up again by the Gay Liberation activists after Stonewall. According to Annamarie Jagose, the Mattachine Society was very hush-hush in its tactics and with the rise of McCarthyism, many of the members were worried of the consequences of this secretive activism and communist roots.[30] Accordingly, the favoured tactics changed to assimilation and conformity, in order to suggest that "homosexual behavior was a minor characteristic that should not create a rift with the heterosexual majority"[31]. While still seeking legal and social recognition on the same terms as heterosexuals, homophile organisations were committed to persuasive rather than rebellious techniques. During the 50s, they argued that, apart from their same-sex sexual preferences, they were model citizens, as respectable as heterosexuals. Edward Albee's play is very radical in this sense. Written in 1962, it goes beyond the conformist tactics and assimilationist strategies of the Homophile Movement, as it questions the very basis behind universalized and normative ideas of symmetrical gender and identity constructions.

When homosexuality was invoked in pre-Stonewall American drama, it was related to the American concern with "manliness," with a model of masculinity and male bonding that homosexuality endangered.[32] This notion will become very present in Albee's play, in the battle between Nick and George. Importantly though, it is also very evident in the criticism the play received for being a closet drama, a homosexual play that tried to masquerade as a

[28] John D'Emilio, *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 238. Here, D'Emilio explains that the term "McCarthyism" refers to the irrational which-hunts led by the national government and Senator John McCarthy during the fifties. Initially, the witch-hunt was aimed at alleged communists because a "red scare" swept the country after the Cold War. Increasingly though, this witch-hunt ensured the investigation, exposing, and execution of not only alleged communists, but alleged homosexual as well.
[29] Engel, "Making a Minority: Understanding the Formation of the Gay and Lesbian Movement in the United States", 381.
[30] Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 25.
[31] Engel, "Making a Minority", 382.
[32] John M. Clum, *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 140.

straight one. But his male characterisations rather points Albee as radical in my view, because he dears to challenge the nuclear society and its norms by showing identity categories such as gender and sexuality as unconventional, as appearance rather that an essential substance.

The problem for the Homophile Movement was not that it lacked members or did not have a gay politics, but that the hostility towards homosexuals was so prevailing and consequences for exposure so severe in the fifties and early sixties, that few were willing to make the sacrifice of "coming out". The problem of challenging the regime of the closet seemed insurmountable. As John M. Clum points out though, the closet dramas of this period were not merely plays about oppressed individuals that had yet to find their voice, they also managed to critique the function of the closet. I will argue that Albee does this through universalizing its repressive effects.

However, the regime of the closet was not dissolved until the Stonewall Riot and Gay Liberation displayed a "sunlit space" of out and proud homosexuality, which proved more attractive than the dark closet.[33] Importantly though, the work of the Homophile Movement should not be undermined. Enabling the Stonewall Riots, according to historian John D'Emilio, was the very efficient activism of the Homophile Movement during the sixties:

> Through the efforts of a brave band of pioneering activists, the idea that homosexuals were a mistreated minority, rather than sinful, criminal, or sick creatures, was infiltrating society and slowly altering the way that gay men and lesbians thought about themselves. In effecting this subtle change in consciousness, activists had prepared the seedbed in which gay liberation would flower in the 1970s.[34]

The counter culture of the sixties was an important context as it laid the grounds for more radical strategies in the fight for civil rights for numerous social movements, and thus enabled the gay movement to grow more radical in its strategies as well.[35] What emerged in the sixties was a new culture for protest that the McCarthy era had long prevented. In the spirit of the counter culture, many social movements were active, such as antiwar-activism and the African American Civil Rights Movement. These movements also influenced the Homophile Movement, and in many ways spurred the Stonewall Riots in 1969.[36]

And finally, on 27 June 1969 the police raided the Stonewall Inn, a famous gay bar owned by the New York Mafia. Although not seen as an historical event at the time, it has become known as Stonewall Day in the USA, a date marking the constitution of gay and

[33] D'Emilio, *Making Trouble*, 239.
[34] D'Emilio, *Making Trouble*, 235.
[35] Dennis Altman, *Homosexual: Oppression & Liberation* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1993), 193.
[36] Martin Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Plume, 1994), 169.

lesbian identities as a political force. What was unusual with this day was not that police raided gay bars – that was commonplace – but that on this day, they met resistance. A memorial for the famous camp icon Judy Garland had taken place the same day, and the resistance the police met, soon culminated into a weekend of riots.[37] Commentators, Annamarie Jagose notes, have dramatically described this day as the shot that was heard around the gay world. Or in a more campy fashion, the hairpin-drop heard around the world.[38] And the fact that riots took place was what made it historically so significant, as it marked an important cultural shift away from the conformist policies and quietist tactics of the 50s. No longer satisfied with such traditional strategies, more radical groups began to form and to criticize the structures and values of heterosexual dominance. Instead of representing themselves as being just like heterosexuals except for their sexual preferences, Gay Liberationists – as they came to call themselves – challenged conventional knowledge about such matters as heterosexual dominance and gendered behaviour.[39] In short then, new, more confrontational activism was epitomized by the Stonewall riot. What I will argue in Chapter Two however, is that these strategies, as illustrated by Crowley's play, will not ensure sufficient basis for true liberation if they rely on the same system as the hetero-normative, in seeing sexuality as essential to identity, and if they do not offer a sufficient challenge to the society and power structures that produce hetero-normativity.

This is not to say that the new, radical strategies were not important. For instead of aiming for acceptance based on consolidation, the goal shifted to liberation and self-determination. This determination included a need to establish a "gay identity" that could serve as a viable alternative to the status of victim homosexuals affirmed in the fifties and early sixties.[40] It is within this political and historical juxtaposition I will argue that Crowley's play is set. *The Boys in the Band* opened on April 14, 1968, one year before the Stonewall Riots took place. As Stonewall marks the emergence of gay identity, so too does Crowley struggle to present his boys within this new identity. And as Stonewall marks the coming out of the limiting, assimilating closet, so too have the boys in *Boys* come out, but Crowley struggles to present his characters outside of the pathological and essentialist discourses of the past. This is why I find the play to be situated perfectly "AT Stonewall", as the Chapter is called, because it illustrates how the radical shift in homosexual presentation has an oppressive past that it is difficult to disrupt.

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[37] Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 30.
[38] Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 31.
[39] Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 30-31.
[40] Engel, "Making a Minority", 387.

In general though, the Post-Stonewall period saw a positive development in the presentation of homosexuals. The new "out and proud" attitude marked a significant shift in the attitude of gay subcultures and gay politics. Not only did the Gay Liberation Front attain increased visibility, but despite internal fractures, they were able to achieve some civil rights. As mentioned, Stonewall marked a new sense of pride of being gay; it was no longer necessary or politically efficient to hide in the closet.[41] According to this "outing", Stonewall also marks the beginning of more radical activism. This radical and confrontational activism was not only concerned with increased rights and visibility for homosexuals, but for groups of marginalized individuals in general. The idea was that this marginalization was a result of the capitalist hegemony privileging whiteness, heterosexuality and maleness.[42] Accordingly, these new strategies affirmed by gay liberationists, suggest that gay politics acknowledged that complete sexual liberation cannot happen without challenging the socially constructed notion of gender and identity as essential/binary concepts. In other words, without social transformation. This went unrecognized by the Homophile Movement, and as we shall see, Crowley's play as well. Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* on the other hand, illustrates well the need for social transformation and in his criticism of the normative abjection of sick and homosexual bodies, which became evident during the AIDS crisis.

By all available measures, gay liberation succeeded in the decade after Stonewall. There was less discrimination and harassment, greater visibility in society, and an increase in gay rights as well.[43] Nevertheless, the positive developments would soon see a dramatic shift after the discovery that five gay men had died from a microscopic virus initially termed GRID (gay related immunodeficiency). The AIDS epidemic obviously became significant for the further development of gay politics. First of all, it spurred groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation to take direct action and challenge the homophobic attitudes of the American government in the face of AIDS. But as D'Emilio notes, the AIDS epidemic had a double edged impact. On the one hand, it ensured an even larger movement against homosexual discrimination that was able to bridge the internal gaps they had struggled with after Stonewall. On the other hand though, the disease increased anti-gay attitudes of the New Right, attitudes that seemed hard to challenge. To be able to oppose the political neglect from the Reagan administration though, lesbian and gay activism broke with the ghettoized politics

[41] Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 32.
[42] Engel, "Making a Minority", 387.
[43] D'Emilio, *Making Trouble*, 256.

Stonewall had spurred.[44] Moreover, AIDS altered the politics of identity as the epidemic made clear the need to seek freedom for concrete individuals in order to save their lives, instead of relying on fluid notions of sexual freedom.

Set in 1985, this development in gay politics after Stonewall is very evident in Kushner's play. Not only does he present homosexually at the center of his play, he refuses to portray limited identity categories. Moreover, I will argue that he illustrates how abjecting AIDS discourses can be disrupted through his protagonist, and his character Louis in many ways come to represent the development in gay activism after Stonewall, in that he abandons his reliance on abstract notions of freedom, and comes to understand the importance of corporeal politics, not only in the face of AIDS, but as a means to tie theory to concrete individuals in general.

Outline

Chapter One will deal with Edward Albee's play and look at how homosexuality is presented in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. The play was first performed in New York City in 1962, before the Stonewall Riots, and was shown on Broadway at a time of great sexual repression. As closet drama was a favoured genre for introducing homosexual content in the period before Stonewall, I will argue that Albee's play was more politically radical and effective, because instead of wooing his audience with sameness, he presents characters with unconventional gender roles that do not have to be gay, and so he is able to challenge the system of essentialism that will define these characters as homosexual. His ambiguity and depiction of the power of language, helps to show how reality or truth cannot be so easily defined. And so instead of displaying the repressiveness of homosexuality alone, as many closet plays do, his play shows the universality of the closet, of every "immorality" that was hushed, shoved into dark closets, and seen as dangerous to the community.

Chapter Two will take on Mart Crowley's play. Critics have claimed that Crowley intended his play as a true portrait of gay men in a highly oppressive era. Whether this is the case or not, the question still remains if the play is offensive or liberating in its presentation of male homosexual identity. I will therefore look at the characters of Crowley's play, to see how their sexuality helps form their identities. I will argue that restrictions are put on their identities even though written by a homosexual with a liberating mission. Moreover, I will focus on how the play's position "At Stonewall" shows how Crowley struggles to avoid the

[44] D'Emilio, *Making Trouble*, 265.

heterosexist representation of homosexuals within pathological discourse, but is not able to provide a viable "gay identity" that does not merely reproduce the homophobic discourse of dominant society. I will use Foucault's ideas of the reproduction of discourse, and show how Crowley is unable to avoid this vicious circle of internalizing homophobia and continued oppression. Eventually, because his play also fails to provide a sufficient social criticism, Crowley's play is not able to present his homosexual characters in a liberating manner either, as he returns to essentialist rhetoric of sexuality as subject-defining.

Chapter Three will look at Tony Kushner's two-part play *Angels in America* which was first performed in 1990, and hailed for its depictions of homosexuality and AIDS politics. I will argue that Kushner's characterizations, in Queer spirit, present not only diversity among identities, but within the individual itself. With showing self-conception as something that is not self-evident, taking into account the myriad ways in which one person can be Other, and by illustrating the subversive potential of performativity, Kushner is able to queer gay male identity. Moreover, the context of AIDS becomes significant in the play's presentation of homosexuality, as it serves to emphasize social practice's abjection of the homosexual body. Through the play's body-imagery and strong sense of materiality, I will argue that Kushner positions corporeality as favored approach to liberation politics. With depicting the painfulness of change and the forgiveness of Roy Cohn, Kushner makes a comment on how to move forward from here, which includes never forgetting the painful, oppressive past of homosexuality when presenting homosexuality in the future, as an opportunity for a queer(ing) tomorrow.

CHAPTER ONE

Before Stonewall: Radical Renderings in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* [45]

"(...) this is the big distinction I've made often between a playwright who is gay and a gay playwright who feels that his identity, or her identity, is established only by being gay, and has an obligation to write about gay subjects with gay characters. All that is ghettoizing".

Edward Albee[46]

From the very first scene of Albee's play, the mood is set, camp is introduced and the gender roles seem ambiguous. And to readers and critics before Stonewall, these were signs of drama with homosexual content. Richard Scheschner, Georges-Michel Sarotte, Howard Taubman and Stanley Kauffman were among the critics who warned their readers against the disguised homosexual content of Albee's play, and who, for this reason, did not find it a play worthy of Broadway.[47] As we shall see, Taubman's critical article, where he points out "tell-tale signs" of hidden homosexuality, offers an extremely biased and limiting view of the play's meanings. And interestingly, his views were not atypical of the heterosexist attacks on homosexual playwrights in period before Stonewall.[48] The general idea seems to have been that whenever something was ambiguous, hidden, or not what it seemed to be, homosexuality was probably the underlying truth that the playwright tried to closet. John M. Clum agrees that for playwrights like Tennessee Williams and William Inge, this was often the case.[49] For Albee however, and especially when it comes to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, sexuality is not presented as an underlying truth hidden, masked or ambiguous, but as we shall see, Albee rather complicates the very idea of an underlying true sexuality. As will become apparent when we look at the critique Albee's play received in the early sixties, there was little opportunity to form viable gay identities on stage in a time when any sign of deviance from the heterosexual norm was judged harshly. What Albee is able to do however, and what makes him quite radical in comparison with other closet-drama playwrights of his time as well as with the conformist strategies of the contemporary Homophile Movement before

[45] Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (London: Vintage, 2001).
[46] Albee quoted in Robin Bernstein, *Cast Out: Queer Lives in Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 186.
[47] Clum, *Acting Gay*, 181.
[48] Clum, *Acting Gay*, 180.
[49] Clum, *Acting Gay*, 180-183.

Stonewall, is how he is able to challenge the polarized concept of gender categories and their plausible identities, as well as universalizing the Closet.

First, through looking at the depiction of George and Martha, we will see how they are depicted with ambiguous character traits that have led some critics to define them as homosexual. What I will argue instead though, is that Edward Albee's play is radical when it comes to presentation of gay identities, because he challenges our view of normality and deviance when it comes to gender and sexual categorization. In the second part of the chapter, I will explore the man-game between Nick and George, and argue that it is vital for George to win in order to validate his masculinity. In this context, both language and performance become important factors that allow Albee to contest essentialist presentations of identity. In the third part, I will argue that truth and illusion becomes an important theme. Importantly, it is not constituted as a polarized concept, but rather, the ambiguity between what is real and what is not is what becomes significant. In this way, the theme underlines the ambiguity of the characters' gender roles, and thus points to Albee's radical challenge of essentialism. Finally, the question arises of whether it is possible to defy polarized and essential concepts through exorcism of the labels they produce. George's search for the marrow represents this defiance, and even though what he accomplishes remains somewhat unanswered, the exorcism of the illusory child still helps show the universality of the closet, of all facades.

1. Ambiguous Roles and the Power of Sex

When Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* first appeared on Broadway, it received major criticism for its assumed hidden homosexual subtext. Critics argued that the characters in his play not only crossed the boundaries for "normal heterosexual behaviour" but also that the life-hood presented was characteristic of the life-hood of homosexuals.[50] Vorlicky explains in his book *Act Like a Man* how American drama shows that the formation of gender identity derives from a polarized view on sexuality, where the gender system interprets the two categories maleness and femaleness into the cultural categories of masculinity and femininity.[51] And as long as drama portrays such characters, it maintains the

[50] C. W. E Bigsby, ed., *Edward Albee, a Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1975). In this collection of essays, the views of Richard Schechner, Alan Schneider, Harold Clurman and Diana Trilling are gathered to show the criticism *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* received. Of these, Schechner's essays come across as the most heterosexist ones, and his ideas as the most reductive of the play to its alleged obscenities, immoralities and homosexual contents.

[51] Robert Vorlicky, *Act like a Man: Challenging Masculinities in American Drama* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 4.

repression of a polarized gender system that will distinguish individuals that do not conform to this norm as deviant. And so an important question then needs to be asked: Can drama respond to the notion of identity as not destiny but a historical and cultural creation?[52] When we look at the criticism the play received, it does not seem like Albee's play is able to.

Among Taubman's symptomatic signs of gayness for example, was the dysfunctional relationship between man and wife. To emphasize the ambiguous roles and almost rebellious deviance of his two main characters, Albee provides them with classical American names with associations to America's first president George Washington and his wife Martha, the first first-lady of the country. This move enables him to point out the irony when the couple comes across as everything but classical or ideal. Quite the opposite, their marriage is portrayed as quite dysfunctional, with George's inability to take care of Martha like she wishes, coupled with Martha's drinking and infidelity. Taubman however, rather than seeing George and Martha as an unhappy heterosexual couple, points out that when we see on stage "scabrous innuendo about the normal male-female sexual relationship"[53], it is a sign of homosexuality. And George and Martha openly display their dysfunctional relationship to their guests and audiences. For example, George does not hide how inadequate and inferior he is to his wife. Moreover, Martha has no problem sharing with her guests her infidelity and dissatisfaction with her husband. Arguably, it is this notion Taubman refers to when he warns us about the "gay life-hood" hidden in too many contemporary American plays:

> Look out for the hideous wife who makes a horror of the marriage relationship. Be suspicious of the compulsive slut…who represents a total disenchantment with the possibility of a fulfilled relationship between man and wife.[54]

To the pre-Stonewall critics, such perversities and negative assumptions about marriage as those of George and Martha had to be signs of homophiles. Because how can a couple that engage in such vulgar behaviour, heavy drinking and public quarrelling be anything other than homosexual? And what does a gay playwright know about the heterosexual marriage? Such heterosexist readings were common.[55] It is interesting that the play was read this way, as it becomes understandable why the Homophile Movement preferred strategies of conformity and assimilation to strengthen their position in society. If deviance was judged harshly, one can understand why homosexuals would rather emphasize their sameness to heterosexuals, to

[52] Vorlicky, *Act like a Man,* 2.
[53] Clum, *Acting Gay,* 176.
[54] Clum, *Acting Gay*, 176.
[55] Clum, *Acting Gay*, 177.

show they too could fit in the ideal and be model citizens if given a chance. This is what closet plays often tried to do in the pre-Stonewall period.[56]

What such biased readings also emphasise, is an essentialist view of homosexuality, as something "true" that will always shine through a person's actions, behaviour, thoughts, and of course, writings. Moreover, it seems such harsh critique was uttered to save the "hetero fantasia". The purpose seems to have been to ensure that traces of deviance from the heterosexual norm so threatening to values of dominant society were only signs of something "sick" so that one could still hope that all innocence and moral was not lost in modern American culture.[57] As Albee himself said years after: "it would let them off the hook, they don't have to think that the play is about themselves"[58]. Arguably then, the interpretations that were made during the early sixties work to show how deeply rooted the binary view on gender was, and how easily one argued for homosexuality when there was deviance from the normal male and female gender categories.

Judith Halberstam points out this notion in *Female Masculinity* when she writes that, "Ambiguous gender, when and where it does appear, is inevitably transformed into deviance, thirdness, or a blurred version of either male or female"[59]. Martha's character illustrates this point explicitly. She comes across as strong, loud, drunk and violent in the first scene, and generally is given quite masculine qualities. Not only do the character-directions describe her as large, boisterous and ample, but George constantly refers to her as vulgar and even manly. During the dancing scene, he describes her in a previous dance contest with her "Biceps bulging, holding up her partner"[60]. Her masculine character traits are even further underscored by George's comparative weakness or femininity. When George provokes Martha toward the end of act two however, Martha flirts blatantly with Nick, and dances closely with him. At such points in the play, Martha comes across as a highly sexual woman. She puts on a sexy dress, and (in her attempt to defeat George) seduces Nick. With mixed and ambiguous qualities like these, Martha's character has often been interpreted as a man in drag, especially by heterosexist critics during the early sixties. As Taubman warns, we are to "look

[56] Clum, *Acting Gay*, 9.
[57] Clum, *Acting Gay*, 147. Clum writes that in the age of McCarthyism, the allegation of homosexuality was the worst accusation anyone could make. And so McCarthyism also enforced the regime of the closet with its cover of normality and innocence in general.
[58] Brenda Silver, *Virginia Woolf Icon* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 108.
[59] Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006), 20.
[60] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 67.

out for the baneful female who is a libel on womanhood"[61]. For what does such a woman say about the female gender role? Or as Judith Butler asks:

> Is the construction of the category of women as a coherent and stable subject an unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations? And is not such a reification precisely contrary to feminist aims? To what extent does the category of women achieve stability and coherence only in the context of the heterosexual matrix? [62]

What Butler points out here, is that the idea that the category of women has certain criteria or certain features that we interpret to derive from their gender, in fact helps to undermine feminist aims. For even though such features are positive and intended to liberate the woman in that it gives strength and stability to their gender role, it is built on the same naturalist and essentialist idea as misogyny. In other words, whether the features assigned to gender categories are positive or negative, the idea of concretization of the subject rather limits the subject than causes liberation. Accordingly, being portrayed with conventional masculine features on one side, and sexual promiscuity on the other, Martha does not fit into the public's view of the category of woman, where attributes like femininity and innocence were seen as the norm. And so, her ambiguous and deviant character was often interpreted as either a gay man in drag or a lesbian.[63] What such interpretations suggest is not only that signs of masculinity in a woman were warning signs for homosexuality, a very limiting view, but also that she was too dominating to be claimed by the female gender category. In order to save the hetero fantasia and the male ethos, women like Martha had to be written off as either homosexuals or whores, in order for the myth of inherent male characteristics like intellectual domination and physical superiority to prevail.[64] If not a man in drag though, Martha does represent a dominating woman, someone quite different from what was normally associated with the female gender role during the early sixties when the nuclear family was seen as the ideal. Acknowledging this can perhaps give us a clue to Albee's mission. With provoking his audience with reversed gender roles for his characters, he is able to criticise the very view we have on gender.

Fitting to that context, George is also depicted as deviant from his male gender category. From the very first scene in the play, there is a sense of something "queer", which is probably what led some critics to suggest a hidden subtext of homosexuality. As the play starts, Martha is imitating Bette Davis. The mood is set straight away, as audiences in the

[61] Clum, *Acting Gay,* 176.
[62] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 8-9.
[63] Clum, *Acting Gay,* 150.
[64] Vorlicky, *Act Like a Man,* 16.

early sixties might recognize this as camp.[65] Hinting further toward something "queer" in this scene, Martha tries to remember the name of the Bette Davis film she is thinking about, and says to George, "come on, *you* know…"[66], insinuating that George would be familiar with the content of any camp reference. Moreover, George lets us know twice that he is quite mistrustful.[67] It is not clear however, if he means he is mistrustful towards others, or that he himself is a cagey person. Either way, this underscores the ambiguity in George's character, and serves to keep the audience or reader alert and suspicious toward him. Albee's use of irony also helps him emphasize the ambiguous and homosexual connotations in the play. Honey's comment about the idea of Nick and George dancing is to her absolutely absurd: "…two grown men dancing, heavens!" Coming from the most naïve character in the play, one cannot help but notice the insinuated sarcasm here. Because the thought of men dancing together, however inappropriate on a Broadway stage, was an activity audiences in 1962, knew was going on.

As mentioned, George can come across as quite feminine compared to the strong Martha. This also adds to the plausible queer reading of George's character. During a conversation between Nick and George, George claims he has been trying for years to clean up the mess he made. By mess, we assume he means him and Martha's marriage: "Accommodation, malleability, adjustment, those seem to be in the order of things, don't they?"[68]. Adjusting to the manly role of the husband Martha wants him to be is apparently hard for him, and thus our view of him as unmanly is strengthened. The other male character Nick on the other hand, refuses to relate to George's issues, and he tells him specifically: "Don't try to put me in the same class as you" [69]. Nick's inability to relate to George's problem can be read as his unwillingness to imagine a male who is not conventionally masculine. A man who cannot fulfil his wife's needs, is for Nick quite incomprehensible and incompatible with the hetero-normative male role. And so, it is not something he wants to relate to. Ironically, the very masculine Nick, even though portrayed as a classical, overtly heterosexual male, is even judged by Taubman as a potential homosexual in disguise. Nick actually fulfils almost all of his criteria: handsome, young, and his proclivities are like a stallion's[70], especially according to Martha: "ooohhh, the stallion's mad"[71]. What Albee

[65] Clum, *Acting Gay*, 188.
[66] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 65.
[67] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 65.
[68]Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 54.
[69] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 54.
[70] Clum, *Acting Gay*, 176.
[71] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 103.

rather seems to be staging here though, is two men representing the male gender category, but in very different ways. Compared to the strong, masculine Nick, George emerges as weak and emasculated.

Rather than seeing George and Martha as a homosexual couple then, we would do the play more justice by recognizing the subversive potential of the staging of two characters deviating from their normative gender roles. Accordingly, as I questioned above, Albee's play does respond to the notion of identity as culturally produced instead of biological destiny, because he refuses to adhere to the norm. Compared to the Homophile Movement's favoured assimilationist strategies and their call for sameness, Albee emerges as quite radical. In the Second Chapter, we will see how Crowley's play attempts to challenge the hetero-normative society by confronting his audience with openly homosexual characters. But because he fails to challenge the basis for homosexual prejudice, Albee is arguably even more radical. Because rather than writing about homosexuals in a closet play, where the characters' sexuality is the underlying truth, he is able to shake our prejudices even more, as he challenges essentialist concepts of gender identity.

Even though I disagree to the alleged homosexual subtext of the play, sexuality does emerge as an important aspect of power and gender identity. Because if we look at how Martha and George use their sexuality, it becomes clear that sex is used as a weapon for power, and that they use this weapon to demand a position as Subject. As opposed to Simone de Beauvoir's view, Luce Irigaray argues that men are not inherently Subject; they only become subjects by identifying women or other males as Object. She claims that, "this phallogecentric economy depends essentially on an economy of difference that is never manifest but presupposed, and bonds based on homosocial desire –a relationship between men which takes place only through the heterosexual exchange and distribution of the women"[72]. This explains why Martha's role is so significant to the distribution of power between the men in the play as well. It is via her their masculinity can materialize, and via her the two men gain power. Whoever is in the position closest to the women, especially if in a sexually laden situation, is the person with the most power. Interestingly, Martha continuously uses her role to emasculate George in front of their guests to strengthen her own power.

Martha uses her sexuality as a means to achieve attention and power over the males in the play. She dances closely with Nick, she compliments his body, and is willing to play "hump the hostess" with him. These are all strategies that she seemingly uses to get attention

[72] Irigaray quoted in Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 52.

from him and to lure him over on her team in the games against George. By putting her sexuality out in the open though, she is not able to achieve power, but rather reduces herself to a sexual object to the two males. She becomes the Object as we shall see in the next part, in the two men's competition for masculinity. We will get back to this below, but recognize here that Martha uses her position as object to emasculate her husband. In the first act for example, Martha compliments Nick's body. He tells them he used to play football and also was a middle weight champion. This points Nick as very macho, and by comparison emasculates George as Martha tells their guests about the boxing match which she won over George. The comparison emasculates George not only in comparison with Nick, but with Martha as well. Arguably, Martha is very aware of the effect her opinion has on the two men. In this sense, she follows Irigaray's argument which claims women as opacity in current discourse rather than the position as Other which is Beauvoir's view.[73] Accordingly, it seems Martha tries to fill this void in discourse by proving her position through her dialogue. Through her language skills, she seeks her right to and her desire for a place in a language that is not misogynistic. However, the dialogue rather proves that the man she chooses to fortify gains power through it over not just the other man, but over her as well. And thus Martha does nothing but reinforce her position as Object to the males' subjectivity.

It is not only Martha who tries to achieve power through her sexuality though. George too finds the best way to compensate for his compromised position as Subject is through proving his male sexuality. He attempts to give Martha her desired phallus, even if it is a fake one. He brings in the pop-gun, and because of its figurative form resembling a penis and the way Martha reacts aroused to it, it has strong sexual connotations.[74] When George also refuses to go any further with Martha than kissing her, he has been able to both arouse and reject her and so this gives him a chance to regain his masculinity. It is, however, Nick who comes out of this situation with the most power, because as Martha is not satisfied with George's half-hearted attempt to arouse her, she turns to Nick and compliments him for being the authentic male: "You don't need any props, do you babe"[75]. Nick's sexuality then comes across as more real and thus manlier.

Martha's emasculation of George continues when she admires Nick's profession over George's. The first act includes a lengthy conversation between Nick and George, a conversation that almost turns into an argument over their respective professions. The topic is

[73] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 15.
[74] Richard E. Amacher, *Edward Albee* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 75. Amacher also argues that the pop-up gun functions as a sexual symbol, and that it helps to mark George's impotence compared to Nick.
[75] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 30.

biology versus history, and George admits he is frightened by what biology does to humanity. Of course one can see this fright as a common scepticism toward intervening with nature, but more importantly, George is preoccupied with genetic engineering, an experiment he feels will raise a race of "test-tube men, superb and sublime"[76]. The reason he fears this, is because it will include the emasculation (or even elimination) of men who deviate from the accepted norms of maleness, it could potentially correct any abnormality of the masculine – it would not accept *men like himself*. Underscoring this sense of emasculation is the image of the scar that would be left on the male genitals:

> GEORGE: (…) A certain amount of regulation will be necessary…uh…for the experiment to succeed. A certain number of sperm tubes will be cut. (…) millions of little slicing operations that will just leave the smallest scar, on the underside of the scrotum [MARTHA laughs.] but which will assure the sterility of the imperfect…the ugly, the stupid…the…unfit.[77]

What the discussion over history versus biology alludes to, is the idea of masculinity as an inherent set of attributes. George realizes that he does not fit into the public view of what is masculine, and so as a means to compensate, it seems, he will fight Nick; one hand on his crotch, one hand free to battle, as he says.[78] What this discussion also applies to though, is two different views on sexuality. And when he lets his two very different male characters discuss it, it helps Albee challenge our view on gender-roles even further as he shows us possible differences *within* the gender categories as well. With an historical view, sexuality may be portrayed as something developed by and within culture over time. Within the biology-field however, sexuality tends to be viewed in essentialist terms, as something one is born with, a factor by which to separate the different sexes. George is frightened by biology because it offers little room for diversity with its claim of naturalism.[79] In this context, Monique Wittig's ideas become interesting. When she discusses different materialist approaches to feminism, she asserts that current feminist arguments undermine the aim of feminism, as they maintain a naturalist approach to gender and sexuality:

> Although practical facts and ways of living contradict this theory in lesbian society, there are lesbians who affirm that "women and men are different species, or races (the words are used interchangeably): men are biologically inferior to women; male violence is a biological inevitability..."[6] By doing this, by admitting that there is a "natural" division between women and men, we naturalize history, we assume that "men" and "women" have always existed and will always exist. [80]

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[76] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 34-35.
[77] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 35.
[78] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 36.
[79] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 35.
[80] Monique Wittig, "One is not Born a Woman," in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1992), 10-11.

Wittig's point is similar to Butler's, in that she declares that a naturalist/biological view on gender can never help liberate the subject, as it will always rely on a view in which gender is something you are born with, a state in which your sex is an essence that defines your personality. With a biological approach to sexuality and gender roles, George realizes he cannot be a proper man when he compares himself to Nick, who will be a prime example of the type of men George imagines as the norm: strong, smart, and able. He seems to feel he deviates from his biological gender category, and Nick then represents, with his macho-masculinity and his limiting profession, a direct threat, as George later claims, "to his lifehood"[81]. It is therefore vital that George wins the games that are played during the party, as he represents the historical view, a view Albee apparently wants us to recognize, a view that offers more possibilities for gender variation.

So far, we have seen how critics' claims of Albee's play as a closet drama with a hidden homosexual content rather limit the play's meanings. I argued that because Albee portrays characters who deviate from their gender roles, and competing views of gender identity within the two male roles, he is able to challenge gender as a polarized concept and opens for diversity in gender identity. To emphasise this, it is important that George can win the competition with Nick, as it serves to show his identity as just as valid as that of the stereotypically manly Nick.

2. Measuring Masculinity and the Power of Language

In addition to the role of Subject, Beauvoir and Irigaray disagree on the markedness of gender as well.[82] They both deal with the marking of the female gender, but interestingly, the marking also concerns the male gender, and although the marking of the male gender tends to include superiority in the patriarchal canon, this markedness is just as limiting. If Irigaray is right in her discussion of the triangular relationship where the male bonds are often stronger than that between male and female as they function as rivals, then the triangle often issues a winner, to which the male loser becomes Object. George realizes that in order to contest his emasculation, he needs to fight "like a man", where Martha is the desired Object, and he needs to be the Victor. Only then can he prove his masculinity to be just as real as Nick's, even though unconventional.

[81] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 59.
[82] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 11-18.

Throughout the second act, an intricate line of competition between the two males Nick and George is drawn out. [83] This competition is interesting because it is a verbal combat to establish heterosexual masculinity – a fight that allows Albee to show the significance of discourse as a power structure in the construction of sexual- and gender-identity. Additionally, the competition between the men also offers a comment to the importance of performance, in the sense that it shows how masculinity is not a private, self evident essence, but that it only gains validity and confirmation when it is enacted and then acknowledged by others.[84] Here, the enactment takes place in front of a double audience: the theatre audience or reader, and the women in the play.

When Nick enters, George gives him a look of confidence, and then a solemn wink.[85] The fact that Nick does not understand this act of communication though, or perhaps chooses to ignore it, sets the tone for the rest of the play. From the moment they meet, there is a sense of competitiveness. One could argue that George's un-masculinity is what causes Nick's inability to communicate with him. Such an interpretation would also support a view on George as homosexual. As Robert Vorlicky explains in *Act Like a Man* though, conversations between male characters in American drama tend to be colored by strong, conventional social coding. They seem to measure each other according to a given, conventional ideal of masculinity, a category that demands physical and intellectual strength, masculine tone and body language, and male prowess to fertilize their wives.[86] We saw in the first part of this chapter how George's masculinity was compromised by Martha. Now, it is time for George to mimic this strategy, and undermine Nick in accordance with this masculine ideal.

This ideal includes the constant social pressure on a man to confirm his masculinity through its difference from femininity.[87] When George confides in Nick his feelings of invisibility that we saw above, this reveals a sensitive and thus "feminine" side of him. Nick does not respond to this. Underlining his character's representation of heterosexual masculinity, he cannot relate to a feeling of invisibility as his role is the Subject to which the women, or unmanly men, become the more invisible Objects. When he gets no response from

[83] Clare Virginia Eby, "Fun and Games with George and Nick: Competitive Masculinity in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*?," *Modern Drama* 50:4 (Winter, 2007): 603. Eby points out that although the concept of homosociality in Sedgwick's terms is present, and is often used to explore an alleged homosexual subtext in the play, the play rather demonstrate the importance of homosocial relationship and how rivalry is important in defining male heterosexual relationships. In other words, George is dependent on beating Nick to gain acceptance from Martha.
[84] Eby also argues this in her essay, "Fun and Games with George and Nick", 604.
[85] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 13-14.
[86] Vorlicky, *Act like a Man*, 16.
[87] Vorlicky, *Act like a Man*, 15.

Nick, it seems George compensates by describing his genitals: "(…) What I've got…I've got this little distension just below the belt…but it's hard…It's not soft flesh"[88]. He admits to feeling lonely and invisible, but because he is rejected, he compensates by showing that his biological masculinity represented by his private parts are still hard and not womanly or weak in any way; he proves that his masculinity is intact. It seems George also realizes that whenever he makes the communicative mood too intellectual or complicated, Nick fails to respond. So when he limits himself to discussing "accepted" topics such as the university or marriage, he does it with an ulterior motive. And it is not the motive that all men according to Vorlicky enter their conversations with, namely to establish a common ground for communication.[89] For even if that tends to be the case, males according to Irigaray also need to compete at being Subject. As opposed to Beauvoir's view that all men are inherently Subject, Irigaray claims that the possibility to become Subject demands an Object.[90] And so with the women absent, George attempts to make Nick the Object and himself the Subject, a task that demands defeating Nick in the man-game.

George continues his attempt at retrieving his role as Subject. And importantly, it is George who sets the standard for the conversations in that it is him who decides what games will be played. In this sense, he functions, as Meyer points out, as a director.[91] George begins a well planned game to retrieve his position of Subject, by regaining his masculine role in the heterosexual relationship with Martha through emasculating Nick. He decides which games to play; humiliate the host, get the guest and hump the hostess are all being played by his direction, and Nick has a hard time playing adequately in these games. At several points in the play, we witness Nick's attempt to play the games on George's level. One of the first attempts he makes is when the women leave the room for the first time, allowing Nick and George a chance of private, "manly" talk. George starts talking about the University, and uses the Greek Parnassus as a metaphor for Daddy's house. Nick however, fails to grasp what George is saying. George sees this, and gives up: "Skip it, (…) it's just a private joke between li'l ol' Martha and me"[92]. Not only does George's answer reveal that he is superior to Nick communicatively, it also shows Martha as a more suitable partner in the verbal combats that

[88] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 18.
[89] Vorlicky, *Act Like a Man*, 16.
[90] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 52. Judith Butler explains Luce Irigaray's term "hommo-sexuality" as a notion that the homo-social bonds between men happens through a heterosexual exchange or distribution of the woman. Here, Nick and George have to define their subjectivity through or according to Martha.
[91] Ruth Meyer, "The Power of Language: Truth and Illusion in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," *Educational Theatre Journal* 20:1 (March 1968): 65. http://jstor.org/stable3204876 (accessed November 08).
[92] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 15.

are played out. George and Martha communicate better, even though Martha is a woman. Accordingly, Nick is emasculated through his inferior language skills.

Fittingly, Albee also uses language as a symbol of power itself; it becomes a meta-symbol, illustrating the significance of discourse as a power mechanism. George is the first one to use this symbol, as he foreshadows the later defeat over Nick during their first conversation without the women: "Good, better, best, bested. (…) How do you like that for a declension, young man? Eh?"[93]. He uses language as a means to hint at the seriousness of the game, a game that demands a loser. Nick however, does not grasp the seriousness of this, and thus continues his gradually decreasing position as the more masculine male.

As George continues his emasculation of Nick, he mimics Martha's strategy at emasculating him. Martha showed her superiority over George through her language skills as well, when he tried to correct her use of the word abstruse. He suggests the word abstract instead, to which Martha responds: "Abstruse! (…) Don't you tell me words"[94]. At this point in the play, Martha is compromising George's position as Subject through her admiration for Nick's work in the Biology department compared with George's lack of influence in the History Department. Accordingly, the fact that she is also better with language at this point, helps symbolize her power, and the power of language itself. George now mimics this strategy when he talks to Nick about the women at the university:

GEORGE:	They all stand around in the street and they hiss at you …like a bunch of geese.
NICK:	Gangle…gangle of geese…not bunch…gangle.
GEORGE:	Well, if you're going to get all cute about it, all ornithological, it's gaggle…not gangle, *gaggle*. [95]

As we saw above, George uses his communicative skills to prove his superiority over Nick, and accordingly, this strategy again proves an important symbol of the link between language and power. George turns out to be the better player, even though it seemed Nick had the upper hand due to his overt masculinity. As Nick seems to realize that he is losing to George towards the end of the play, he makes one last effort to win, and now the roles have changed, it is now Nick who has to compensate for his inadequacies. His method would be a good one, had he been able to carry it out. Nick makes a vital error in this last effort though. In his threat to beat George in his own game as his last communicative strike towards him, Nick has realized the importance of language, but he makes an important mistake when he says he will

[93] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 16.
[94] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 33.
[95] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 60.

"play the charades like you've got them set up, I'll *play* in your language, I'll *be* who you say I am"[96]. Unfortunately for Nick, he has not grasped the difference between playing and being, and as he mixes this up he again reveals his inferiority to George through his use of language. Importantly, Nick fails to acknowledge the significance of performance. To Nick, "I'll play" and "I am" is indistinguishable, but George has realized that performing a role becomes valued over any biological or essential reality, and his continuing to perform Male (as in showing his manly attributes and developing his role through his language) ensures that he can emasculate Nick and regain his position as Subject. As Butler shows in *Gender Trouble*, the social gender is the primary gender, not the biological gender. Gender is constituted by behaviour and appearance, and thus creates an illusion that there is a biological gender that is prediscursive and more real or natural. Accordingly, it constitutes a kind of "inner essence" which the "outer" gendered expressions and behaviors copy. But as she points out, this copy does not have an original, and thus she deconstructs the distinction between biological and social gender, and shows the biological gender as always already social.[97] And so, as gender is something we enact through expressions and behaviors, it is not something we are or have, it is performative. Albee's favouring of performance then, shows how he contests the essentialist idea of an interior identity. George's character illustrates this. In the beginning, George was portrayed as weak and feminine. Accordingly, his identity was judged as either homosexual or emasculated because he deviated from the heterosexual male norm. By pointing to his male genitals and winning the verbal combat over Nick however, George has enacted male attributes to establish a male identity. To illustrate the importance of performance in gender identity even further, we can look at what happens when the women return to the scene.

With the women in the room again, the competition is driven by the wish to both demean the other male to objects in front of the women, and at the same time to do this by gaining power over the women. As we saw with Martha's emasculation of George above, the reason why the emasculation gains validity and importance is precisely because it is performed in front of an audience. In this case, both the theatre audience and the audience of the two other characters in the play provide confirmation to the establishment of gender roles and the emasculation.

When the audience and Nick are under the impression that true communication is finally achieved between the men, George destroys that hope with his use of newly gathered

[96] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 79. (italics, mine).
[97] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 10-11.

information to not bond with Nick, but to further his destruction of him. At the beginning of Act Two, Nick confesses to George that he married Honey because he thought she was pregnant. George, returning this confidential gesture, tells Nick a story about a kid who accidentally killed both his parents and is now in a mental institution. Seemingly, this is a moment of honesty and true communication between the men, but just as Nick thinks he has figured out how to play along in George's game, we see him losing to George. Because as soon as the women return, George brutally shares with them his new knowledge about the circumstances surrounding Nick and Honey's marriage. The consequences are tough for Nick, not only because Honey becomes upset with him, but also because he has been humiliated in front of both of the play's women. As for the emasculation of George, the demeaning of Nick's role here also gains extra significance as it is performed in front of the women. The triangulation of the two males competing over the role of Subject and power over Martha, the desired object, is again materialized and explains why it is vital for George to make sure Martha is there to see the emasculation of Nick. Only then will he become superior in her eyes. Again George has mimicked Martha's emasculating strategy from Act One, when she shared the secret of the existence of their (illusory) son.

Now however, George is able to regain the role of Subject, as his directed game of hump the hostess ensures the complete failure on Nick's part as he fails to perform male biologically as well. As Martha and Nick are alone, ready to play "Hump the hostess", Nick has a chance of getting back at George by having sex with Martha, and as she represents the desired Object, this would prove his position as Subject in a very crucial way. When he lights Martha's cigarette however, it foreshadows his defeat as the symbol of lighting a lady's cigarette and falling down the evolutionary ladder is materialized. This symbol was first hinted at in the first act, when George refused to light Martha's cigarette:

> GEORGE: (…) Can I get you anything?
> MARTHA: (…) Well…uh…sure, you can light my cigarette, if you're of a mind to.
> GEORGE: [*considers, then moves off*]: No…there are limits. I mean, a man can put up with only so much without he descends a rung or two on the old evolutionary ladder…[*Now a quick aside to NICK*]…which is up your line…[98]

Even though George hints at Nick's fate, Nick does not realize the importance of it as he proves when he lights Martha's cigarette right before the attempted intercourse.[99] As foreshadowed, they end up not consummating after all. George was right in his connection

[98] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 26.
[99] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 86.

between lighting Martha's cigarette and descending on the evolutionary ladder. For after this, Nick is merely a flop to Martha, and his title is reduced to that of a gelding and a Houseboy.[100] Nick's masculinity has failed him; not only did he lose his power to George discursively; he is not able to perform his masculinity physically either. Talking about their attempted intercourse, Martha ensures him of his invalid performance:

> MARTHA: You're certainly a flop in some departments.
> NICK: You should try me some time when we haven't been drinking for ten hours, and maybe…
> MARTHA: I wasn't talking about your potential; I was talking about your goddamn performance.[101]

Again, performance is shown as superior to biology. And building up under Nick's failure, Martha ensures him George is in fact the only man ever to have pleased her, and so George's physicality is now shown as manlier and more sufficient. The irony in Nick's defeat does not go silently by either, as Martha mocks him for it: "ohhh, the stallion's mad, hunh, the gelding's upset. Hahahaha!"[102]. She points out his failure as a man, by referring to him as a castrated male. George and Martha now join in degrading Nick as a mere houseboy, and Martha completes the symbol of lighting her cigarette as she explains to him that the only thing for him to do now is to "houseboy his way back up the [evolutionary] ladder"[103]. With Nick's failed performance and Martha joining George's degrading of Nick, the role of Subject has now shifted completely from Nick's possession to the possession of George.

We see how language functions as a meta-symbol of power one last time right before Nick's final defeat, as George walks into the kitchen where Hump the Hostess has just been tried out. Now, Martha has gone too far, and with his morality and fidelity intact, George uses his pretended indifference to Martha's infidelity as a last strike towards both her and Nick. He pretends to not care what has just happened, and this infuriates Martha. Because if she cannot use her sexuality to make George jealous, then what's the use? She attempts going back to the strategy of language though, as she once more attempts to fight her position as linguistic opacity by correcting George's grammar. Only this time, George will not stand corrected:

> GEORGE: [very cheerful]: Well now, let me see. I've got the ice…
> MARTHA: …gotten…
> GEORGE: *Got*, Martha. Got is perfectly correct…it's just a little archaic, like you.[104]

[100] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 102.
[101] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 100.
[102] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 103.
[103] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 104.
[104] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 88.

George is now superior in the verbal combats against both Nick and Martha, which helps to symbolize his power and final victory.

As the play ends, the language is still of importance. In the last scene, the dialogue between George and Martha is dominated by monosyllables. Moreover, Martha's lines are highly ambiguous, as they consist of unfinished sentences and the ambiguous contradiction when she continues to answer George: "Yes. No"[105]. This of course underscores the ambiguity that has dominated the thematic implications of the gender categories of Martha and George in the first part of this chapter. Irigaray claims the possibility of another language or signifying economy is the only way to escape the marks of gender. Thus, Albee poses an alternative to the Wittigian solution we saw above. While Wittig sees language as concrete and changeable. Butler argues that she underestimates the power and function of language.[106] Albee has shown us how language as a power structure is interwoven in the conceptions we have of ourselves and others. By letting his two males engage in a competition that in many ways is about the male category, he challenges our views on deviance and assumptions towards gender even further. Importantly, he lets George win the game, and so George with his "deviant" masculinity can emerge as an accepted male despite his unconventional features. We also saw in this part how Albee establishes performance as superior to biological "reality" or potential, and thus contests essentialist ideas of gender identity. This radicalism will become even more apparent when we explore the ambiguous boundaries between truth and illusion in the play, and its connection to the universality of the Closet.

3. Truth vs. Illusion: Universalizing the Closet

As a means to live out the public expectations towards their genders and the conventions of heterosexual marriage, George and Martha have created for themselves an illusionary child. Although warned by George, Martha tells Nick and Honey about their son. And so, as Martha makes their private illusion of a normal heterosexual relationship public, George decides that he has to kill that illusion. He takes Martha and his guests with him on a dramatic exorcism of their illusions and their masks as represented by the son. Martha and George have so far somewhat willingly displayed their dysfunctional relationship to Nick, Honey and the theatre audience. This has caused much of the play's humor and horror. To finalize the public display

[105] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 128.
[106] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 35-36.

of their "abnormal" selves, George kills off the son as well. Because with it, he kills the only cover they have as a "normal" heterosexual man and wife. Critics have disagreed whether the exorcism of the son-myth in the Third Act is motivated by contempt, revenge, or the wish to restore a life free of illusions. Whatever the motive though, George seems to think that in order for them to accept each other as husband and wife or as man and woman, he needs to kill off the myth that gives them a cover of normality.[107]

To illustrate the thematic implications of this exorcism, Albee makes a link to Tennessee William's *A Streetcar named Desire* when George comes to Martha and Nick with the snapdragons. Instead of recognizing this link as a resemblance to a play by another homosexual playwright and thereby expecting that to have significance here, the theme of illusion versus reality is brought out through this link, and is far more significant in my opinion. Firstly, George echoes the Mexican flower-seller who Blanche DuBois hears in *Streetcar*: "Flores por las mortes" – flowers for the dead. In Williams' play, the chant is often said to symbolize the relationship between sex and death, as this is the moment when Blanche realizes her fate.[108] The Mexican flower-woman has announced her fate; her own sexuality will finally tear her down as sexuality was also the reason for her husband's suicide. Secondly, and more relevant here perhaps, is the fact that the reason for Blanche's horrified reaction to the flower-woman, is that all this time, she has been involved in sexual promiscuity in order to avoid a reality where she has to cope with her aging, and even worse, her husband's suicide. When George reminds us of Williams' play then, it is arguably due to the fact that Blanche also tries to live an illusion, as George and Martha attempt with their illusionary son.

Emphasizing the theme of truth versus illusion, George and Martha quarrel over whether the moon was up or not, again echoing Blanche's struggle with reality in Williams' play. When Blanche lies in the bathtub, she sings "It's only a paper moon" and the lyrics again refers to her unwillingness to face reality:

> Say, it's only a paper moon,
> Sailing over a cardboard sea,
> But it wouldn't be make believe,
> If you believed in me.[109]

[107] Anne Paolucci, *From Tension to Tonic: the Plays of Edward Albee* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1973), 56.
[108] Roger Boxill, *Tennessee Williams* (London: Macmillan, 1987), 78-79.
[109] Tennessee Williams: *A Streetcar Named Desire: With an Introduction by Arthur Miller* (New York: New Directions, 2004), 120.

The speaker of this song seems to say that it does not matter what is true or not, for as long as the two lovers both believe in the same fantasy, it is not make-believe. For Blanche as well as for Martha and George, this song in many ways sums up their approach to life. When it comes to Martha and George, their son is perhaps not a biological or verifiable *real* son, but he is still a reality for them. This again serves to underscore the inferiority of biological reality to performed reality or appearance. If the illusion is the fiction of a normal marriage relationship with the son as a cover for their heterosexual normality though, what is then the truth that is hidden behind, or functioning as the opposite of this illusion? That they are really unhappy and gay? This interpretation has been the basis for homosexual interpretations of George and Martha.[110] What this view presupposes though, is a conception of truth as the opposite of illusion.

Throughout the play however, it is not truth and illusion as two polarized opposites that emerge as an important subject, but rather the ambiguity of what is real and what is not. There are several incidents that illustrate this. As Ruth Meyer points out, when we hear the story about the boy who killed his parents the first time, George tells it to Nick as a story he has heard. When the story reappears however, it is first as a book George has written, and then through Martha who reminds us that George too enjoys his bourbon, which was a detail about the boy from George's story.[111] It now becomes unclear whether this story is true or not, and whether George is actually the boy in the story. And later, Martha claims it is not a book at all, but a true story that happened to George.[112] And so, the audience and the reader are left to wonder what is true and what is not. Another moment that shows the ambiguity between the real and the illusory is when George claims he has been in Majorca and the Mediterranean Sea, while Martha hard-headedly claims this is not true. And importantly, this ambiguity is already present in the first scene, when Martha tells George, "If you existed, I'd divorce you"[113]. With such strange vocabulary and blurry renderings, the ambiguous boundaries between truth and illusion then are present from the start. What becomes revealed through the exorcism of the son-myth then, is not necessarily the truth as the opposite of their illusion, but as we shall see, George's concept of the marrow and the universal appeal of facades.

Importantly, what this ambiguity also alludes to and what makes Albee radical in my opinion, is the characters' gender-roles. The theme serves to underscore the presentation of

[110] Clum, *Acting Gay*, 177.
[111] Meyer, "The Power of Language: Truth and Illusion in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf", 66.
[112] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 66-81.
[113] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 7.

ambiguous and deviant characters as we saw above. The power games that have been played out have shown Martha as both powerful and manly as well as a sexual woman, while George comes off as weak and effeminate, but at the same time able to prove his manliness through his performance as Subject. And finally Nick has been shown as both stud and gelding. The importance of the theme of truth versus illusion then should perhaps be read in this context, as emphasizing the meaninglessness of constantly struggling to find the "truth", to define what is real and what is illusion. For as Foucault claims, when we expect sex to speak "truth", we also expect sex to have an existence of its own, an essence of the self that defines its attributes.[114]

This argument by Foucault also poses an important criticism of Wittig. Although she refutes a naturalistic view on gender, she fails to recognize the interdependence of the power structures by which gender is constructed. Wittig "refers to 'sex' as a mark that is somehow applied by an institutionalized heterosexuality, a mark that can be erased through practises that contest the institution"[115]. For her then, erasing gender codes is possible without erasing the self, as she sees the markedness of gender as something that is *applied* to the self, not inherent in its conception. For this view to be plausible however, sex needs to have had or to be able to have an existence prior to language or prior to society, in a condition where it is unmarked. Albee stages a scene where George exorcises these normalizing marks or labels. The question arises however, if such an exorcism of labels is possible without erasing the Self, as Foucault argues.

Wittig's solution presupposes a "view from nothingness" as Thomas Nagel aptly puts it, where one expects that the self can stand outside itself and the constitutive practices which the self are part of and constructed by.[116] Foucault as well can be said to hold a materialist view, but he does not commit the fallacy of thinking that while regulatory practices or power structures are contingent, they are easily changed. The problem for both Albee and Wittig then, rests on the rhetoric behind George's idea of the marrow. Is it possible to dissolve the normalizing labels of the Self and get to the marrow? And if so, what does this "marrow" consist of?

Towards the end of the play, the word "snap" comes up several times, each time in reference to the mounting tension between Martha and George that has now come to a climax, to "total war"[117]. Martha is the first to pronounce it, as she tells George how sick and tired she

[114] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1, An Introduction*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), 69.
[115] Wittig explained in Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 34.
[116] Thomas Nagel: *The View from Nowhere*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 9.
[117] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 84.

is of "the whole arrangement" and that it has finally "snapped"[118]. George then, underscoring the importance of this word, starts throwing snapdragons at Martha and Nick, while shouting the word "snap"[119]. As he stops throwing the flowers, Martha asks him if truth or illusion does not matter to him at all, to which his only answer is "snap"[120]. As incomprehensible as this seems at first, it is finally the naïve, hyper feminine Honey who touches on the importance of the word:

> HONEY: …the tiles…
> GEORGE: …the tiles…Snap the Dragon.
> HONEY: …peel the label…
> GEORGE: We all peel labels, sweetie; and when you get through the skin, all three layers (…) When you get down to bone, you haven't gone all the way, yet. There's something inside the bone…the marrow…and that's what you gotta get at.[121]

Whether Honey realizes the significance of this or not, the peeling of the label on the brandy bottle symbolizes the notion of getting to the marrow that George has been talking about. George does not want masks or labels to hide behind; he wants to "snap out of it" and get to the marrow, to the core. But for that to happen, an exorcism of the illusions and facades is necessary. We have seen how the characters use their sexuality to achieve power, and how their ambiguity helps contest a polarized view on gender categories. But like Wittig, Albee depicts a scene in which these marks are dissolved, and where George and Martha have the opportunity to gain acceptance as who they are, without any illusions. Even though one could argue that Albee has not resolved what will happen if you "(…) take the life-lie away from the average man" then, at least this signifies the universality of the Closet.[122]

For as Thomas Porter points out in his article about the play's satire that acting out stereotypical gender-roles like Nick and Honey makes it possible to live together and communicate politely, but superficially.[123] George and Martha on the other hand, show us more deviant and hence also more diverse personalities. In this sense, George's search for the marrow might represent his wish to dig deeper than scraping on the surface of stereotypes, he wants the marrow; he wants non-shallow and more variously gendered or even queerer persons. In this exorcism then, lies a universal hope to retrieve a condition that is free of conventional gender codes and hetero-normative facades. As opposed to seeing this as a wish

[118] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 82.
[119] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 108.
[120] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 109.
[121] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 113.
[122] Henrik Ibsen, "The Wild Duck," in *The Oxford Ibsen*, ed./transl. James Walter McFarlane (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), Volume 6:227.
[123] Thomas E. Porter, *Myth and Modern American Drama* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), 225.

to come out of the closet as some critics have done, we should rather acknowledge the universal aspect of Ibsen's life-lie – the protection and happiness any façade or mask can offer, a notion any human being could relate to.

In this chapter, I have argued that Albee's play challenges our views on normality and deviance, and contests essentialist presentations of identity. He does this, not by writing a closet play with a hidden, homosexual subtext, but through provoking his readers and audiences with unconventional gender roles. Moreover, through giving language an important role in the play, he is able to show the significance of language in how we categorize, and how performance or appearance is superior to any biological "reality". When George repeats the title, "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?", Martha answers that she is. While critics thought Martha was the scary one, the drag or strong, vulgar woman critics felt they had to warn the audiences about, it is not her we should fear.[124] Rather, it is the notion of living without illusions, without closets to hide in, that becomes the fear-factor. In this sense, Albee's play also gives a voice to gay activism. One that is not closeted, and that is not reduced to homosexual stereotypy but one that is universal, as we all can relate to the fright of not being accepted for who we are on one side, and true, naked visibility of the self on the other. To give Albee some well deserved credit for his play then, I would suggest that although Albee is often criticised for having no core under all the alleged layers in this play, the fact that he gives us a play about the repressive effect of the closet and its universal appeal instead of presenting homosexuality as the repressed condition of a small minority, he avoids the "ghettoizing" he criticises others for. This play then is quite radical compared to other closet dramas before Stonewall, as well as to the favoured conformist strategies of the Homophile Movement. Here at least, his characters are allowed to tear down the closet door, to live out their deviant identities differently from the norms of masculinity and femininity, even if it is at the cost of a treasured son, a much needed cover of normality. And as will become clear in the following chapter, avoiding ghettoizing is vital in challenging biased prejudices and oppressive forces of regulatory discourses in society.

[124] Silver, *Virginia Woolf Icon*, 111.

CHAPTER TWO

At Stonewall: Acting Out(ed) with *The Boys in the Band* [125]

"I would say that all nine of them [the characters of *The Boys in the Band*] are split-up pieces of my self. They were miserable and bitchy. If I was wrong, it was definitely a reflection of what was wrong in my head. But that's the way I saw things then. I think that the self-deprecating humour was born out of a low self-esteem if you will. From a sense of what the times told you about yourself. (...) There were still not just attitudes, there were laws against one's being – the core of one's being".

Mart Crowley [126]

On its debut in 1968, Mart Crowley's play *The Boys in the Band* was immediately hailed as a breakthrough in the representation of homosexuality.[127] Critics such as Clive Barnes had witnessed the closet dramas of the fifties and now welcomed this more radical, overtly homosexual play. Gay Liberationist Dennis Altman on the other hand, did not find it successful in its presentation of homosexuality, as he saw it as a play of self hate that did not help liberation.[128] These two critics in a sense then represent the historical and political juxtaposition in which Crowley is caught. With this play, he tries to come out of the past by defying the closet at work in Albee's decade, and attempting to reveal the "truth" about homosexuals, and simultaneously seek a new representation of homosexuality. The play struggles "at Stonewall", between the pathological representation of homosexuality of the past, and the emergence of the identity politics of the late sixties and seventies.

Some critics have claimed that Mart Crowley intended his play as a true portrait of gay men in a highly oppressive era.[129] Whether this is the case or not, the question still remains if the play is offensive or liberating in its presentation of male homosexuality. Does Crowley's play manage to provide a new representation of homosexuality? Throughout this chapter, I will look at the characters of Crowley's play, to see how their homosexuality forms their identities. The first part of this chapter will show that the characters' self conception is still informed by a discourse of pathology along a hetero-sexist axis. Within this discourse, their sexuality comes to be seen as deviant and their behavior is presented as feminine and

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[125] Mart Crowley, *The Boys in the Band* (New York and Hollywood: Samuel French, Inc., 1998).
[126] *The Celluloid Closet*, written and directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedan, prod. Bernie Brillstein (USA: Columbia TriStar, 1996), 1:01:10-1:03:56.
[127] Clive Barnes, *The Boys in the Band*, The New York Times, Copyright April 15 1968, http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=FC77E7DF1739EE62BC4D52DFB2668383679EDE&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=2 (accessed February 17, 2009).
[128] Altman, *Homosexual: Oppression & Liberation*, 36, 38.
[129] Michael R. Schiavi, "Teaching the Boys: Mart Crowley in the Millennial Classroom," *Modern language Studies* 31:2 (Fall 2001): 7. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3195338 (accessed December 08).

stereotypical. Stonewall ensured a turn in gay politics toward confrontational and "in your face" tactics that announced that the closet was now torn down. And as a result, Stonewall marked the emergence of a specifically gay identity and a sense of pride in being gay.[130] Crowley tries to establish this, but as we will see in the second part of this chapter, his characters only reproduce the already existing, hetero-normative discourse and so restrictions are put on their identities. Throughout the third part, I will argue that Crowley manages to give some social critique with his play, although it is not a sufficient one as the play's ending returns to essentialist rhetoric of sexuality as private and subject-defining. Finally, with looking at the theories of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, I will suggest solutions to how one might present an individual identity that is not interpreted based on an essentialist, binary understanding of sexuality, but which Crowley fails to establish.

1. From Pathology to Gay Identity?

As we saw in Chapter One, the strategies of the Homophile Movement and gay writers of the fifties, was normally that of quietist tactics. Playwrights such as Edward Albee, Tennessee Williams and William Inge talked about homosexuality very indirectly, and aimed for freedom and an increased acknowledgement in society through depicting homosexuals either as a minority, suffering harshly from the debasing from mainstream society, or through assimilationist tactics, showing homosexuals as common, model citizens.[131] Considering the political shift from conformational to confrontational strategies then, Crowley's play in many ways captures this political move. He casts "six tired screaming fairy queens and one anxious queer"[132] and allows them to endure in a night of drinking, of camp utterances and poses, and to be openly gay - showing the audience that the closet is now gone.

Part of the confrontational strategies of the Gay Liberation movement included the rejection to present homosexuality within terms of pathology.[133] Homosexual behavior was still a criminal act in most states of the U.S., and was branded a sexual deviation by both physical and mental health professionals. Additionally, homosexuality was listed as a mental disorder by the *American Psychiatric Association* in their *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders*.[134] To challenge this pathological view, Gay Liberation was

[130] Duberman, *Stonewall*, 208.
[131] Clum, *Acting Gay*, 89.
[132] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 8.
[133] Scroggie, "Producing Identity", 238.
[134] Engel, "Making a Minority", 389.

constructed around the notion of a distinctly gay identity.[135] In this context, it became important to establish this identity, which included taking pride in being gay and belonging to this identity category.

Although attempting to create a gay identity though, already in the first scene of Act One, Crowley presents his characters within a pathological discourse. Donald asserts that "The Doctor cancelled!"[136] and goes on to talk about how he is depressed and not well yet, figuring he will need many more years of analysis with his psychologist.[137] Both Michael and Donald present their developmental histories as causes for their homosexuality. Donald has realized he was "raised to be a failure", and that "it all goes back to Evelyn and Walt"[138]. Michael does disrupt his talk about his depression with a sarcastic comment that might seem like a critique of this logic of arrested development, when he says "Christ, how sick analysts must get of hearing how mommy and daddy made their darlin' into a fairy"[139]. Although seemingly critical though, Donald does not pay this comment any attention, and keeps on telling Michael about his upbringing and its effects on how he has developed. And even Michael turns to this same logic, as he too blames his parents for what he refers to as his "condition". When Donald asks him why he is miserable, he provides a similar explanation:

> Same song, second verse. Because my Evelyn refused to let me grow up. She was determined to keep me a child forever (…) and my Walt stood by and let her do it. She bathed me in the same tub with her until I grew too big for the two of us to fit and she made me sleep in the same bed with her until I was fourteen years old.[140]

Michael gives an explanation of his own development which includes an inappropriate and too close relationship with his mother and a distant father. These are classic components of psychoanalytical explanations for the development of homosexual boys.[141] Both Michael and Donald give us their stories of arrested development that present homosexuality very much like a condition or a developmental maladjustment, in pathological terms.

There is however, a hint of criticism in how Crowley presents the pathology-theme as Donald satirically reminds Michael that their "in-depth" conversations do not really help them.[142] They agree in a humorous tone that there's nothing quite like feeling sorry for

[135] Scroggie, "Producing Identity", 237.
[136] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 5.
[137] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 6.
[138] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 9.
[139] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 10.
[140] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 13.
[141] Scroggie, "Producing Identity", 243.
[142] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 13.

oneself, undercutting the content of their previous conversation. However, this also shows that they know that there is nothing to do about the source of their despair, their homosexuality. For Donald, the analysis seems to help him deal with a troubled self and his low self esteem. Similarly, Michael seems to have much less faith in the work of psychology, and continually refers to Donald's analyst as a prick. The problem with their need to see these analysts however, is that it includes a strong sense of self-hatred implied throughout the play. Moreover, the role of the analyst is never discussed and their need to see one is merely taken for granted, which illustrates how the boys are unable to construct an identity for themselves that is not based on pathology and terms of maladjustment and condition.[143] So even when the play returns to a campy tone after this, the text's presentation of their personal identity remains tied to pathological constructions.[144]

In an attempt to establish a gay identity, the characters seem to recognize their homosexuality as a "truth" within identity discourses. This representation is a significant development in that homosexuality is understood as defining *who the characters are* rather than a condition they suffer from. But as we shall see, Crowley's attempt to depict this "identity" results in a depiction of gay stereotypes and an essentialist view of sexuality as a personal truth that defines you and thus includes reading gay as a self-evident category for identity.

Clearly, the boys' homosexuality is defining for their identity in this play. Their sexuality is crucial to their conceptions of themselves and of each other. As we saw above, the conversation between Michael and Donald in the first scene sets the tone of medical discourse. This scene however, like William Scroggie also observes, attempts to present homosexuality within a discourse of identity as well. During the first scene, the boys' homosexuality is continually restated. It emerges not only as a link to Donald's depression, but also as defining nouns for the expected guests. They are "screaming queens", "anxious queers" and "tired fairies"[145]. When Harold arrives, it becomes even clearer how defining their sexuality is. He uses various adjectives to describe himself, but importantly his sexuality becomes the significant, defining noun: "What I am Michael, is a thirty-two year old, ugly, pock marked Jew Fairy"[146]. What he goes on to say also underscores the two available sorts of discourses within which the boys are able to define themselves. Harold has just defined himself as homosexual within a discourse of identity, but when he continues to explain that he

[143] Clum, *Acting Gay*, 255.
[144] Scroggie, "Producing Identity", 242.
[145] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 8.
[146] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 48.

needs to smoke grass to dare to show "his face to the world" he also speaks within a pathological discourse, within which his sexuality is seen as deviant and thus becomes a source for his self-loathing. Throughout the play, the boys struggle with just this, to define themselves within the terms of these two discourses. And as we will see, they fail to suffice as a basis for a healthy self-conception for any of the characters.

For Michael and Donald as well, sexuality defines their subjectivity. Donald claims Michael gives "faggots a bad name" and sees himself as "a model fairy" even though Michael calls him a "reliable, hard-working, floor-scrubbing, bill-paying fag" [147]. Again, homosexuality is the defining noun, and thus is considered the "truth" about the subjects in the play. And it becomes important for them to come to terms with this "truth". An important strategy for Gay Liberation was to "come out" and to explicitly confront others with one's sexuality. When Hank explains his choice to leave his wife for his male partner, Larry, he explains it in these same terms:

> I really and truly felt I was in love with my wife when I married her. It wasn't altogether my trying to prove something to myself. I did love her and she loved me. But…*there was always that something there*. (…) For so long I either labeled it something else or denied it completely. (…) And then there came a time when *I just couldn't lie to myself anymore*.[148]

Here, Hank explains his sexuality as the "inner truth" about himself, as an essential truth that cannot be denied. Even if this does paint him as sympathetic and is a move away from a pathological discourse towards a discourse of identity, the logic is still based on a discourse of essence. An identity politics that is based on an essentialist view still agrees that identity is a prediscursive core within the subject, defining the subject without allowing for instability or changeability. When the boys discuss their different coming-out stories, Emory explains how he has "known what I was since I was four years old"[149] and Michael accuses Alan of being homosexual, but unable to "face *the truth* about yourself"[150]. In the language of these boys then, homosexuality is not only a part of who they are – it is their *whole* "truth", a factor that apparently defines them completely. Here as in Gay Liberationist activism then, identity is seen as self-evident or logical, including a sense of "the self" as existing outside the body as a *Truth*.

This notion, however, is challenged by later Queer theorists such as Judith Butler, who contributed to reconceptualising identity as a cultural mythological construction. As she

[147] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 12.
[148] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 87. (italics, mine).
[149] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 87.
[150] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 97. (italics, mine).

claims neither sex nor gender is "prediscursive", sexual identities arguably become imitations of what we think is an original. As we saw in the previous chapter though, this original does not exist, and so it is rather the continuous acts we perform that create one's identity. [151] If sex is merely constituted through acts though, and is not a natural essence of the self, then these boys can act so that they may create an individual identity, freed of traditional dogmas. With a Butlerian view, the boys can dismiss the idea that homosexuality is the complete, essential "truth" about their selves, and perform gay without being sanctioned by sex, gender or sexuality, or be interpreted to belong to any one, self-evident, category. It enables them to perform gay, without performing feminine - without being trapped in a category where sexual promiscuity, effeminacy, shame or guilt are inherent characteristics. I will come back to this later, but for the moment recognize that to be able to choose your own identity, includes realizing that "prediscursive" sex is the discursive product of gender, so that the performances we enact are not seen as a result of something "prediscursive". Acts, behavior and social status will be free only when they do not follow from an implicit category.

Another example of how Crowley shows his awareness of the desired shift in representation of homosexuality to terms of identity during this period (although maintaining an essentialist view), is his attempt to give his characters particular "homosexual behaviors". We meet the characters in *The Boys in the Band* within a private domain, a personal sphere where they only interact with each other. They are all homosexuals, which allows us to see how they treat each other according to their sexuality when they do not have to adjust to anyone else's standards. Throughout the play, the six men call each other by names, such as queens and ladies. They also call each other by girl's names and refer to each other as "she". By using such names, the boys are able to create an atmosphere of camaraderie, of a common, campy humour, and internal language. This private setting and communication is present throughout the play, but even though it can be read as a warm, inclusive subculture, it shows that the boys' homosexuality is presented in terms of certain characteristics that are seen as inherent to their identity.

Gay Liberation after Stonewall frequently understood itself as challenging that system which represented certain gender roles as natural and so stabilized heterosexual privilege. They wanted sexual liberation for all humans, meaning that they sought sexuality unstructured by the cultural constraints of sex and gender. In order to liberate homosexuals then, Gay Liberation was committed to eradicating fixed notions of femininity and masculinity. [152] In his

[151] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 173-180.
[152] Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 36-37.

play however, Crowley might be pursuing a true picture of gay America, but as he is not able to challenge the binary system, he cannot help liberation either. By calling each other by girls' names, the boys arguably agree to feminine gender-roles, although belonging to the male biological sex. This same factor becomes apparent when Michael makes fun of Alan, and talks down on him for being a "buddy-buddy, a he-man"[153]. This points to the fixed binary of male and female genders, and illustrates how this binary is copied in the construction of sexual categories as well; the masculine, hetero he-man versus the feminine gay. Additionally, it underlines the fact that Michael and his friends do not see each other as proper men. In many ways then, the boys agree to a pathological sense of self and simultaneously illustrate the biases of the binary system as they act feminine because they deviate from the "standard" of masculinity. In this sense, Albee emerges as more radical than Crowley, in that he was able to challenge this "standard" instead of merely adhering to it. If the boys act like this with no one outside of the campy sub-culture present though, are the biases of homosexuals as feminine and promiscuous justified?

Assuming a binary system of the sexes, arguably ensures many limitations on the freedom of the subject. According to Butler, if we assume a binary system of the sexes, we also agree that sex is something essential, something that is prediscursive; "prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts"[154]. With such a view on sexuality then, the constructed genders are supposed to derive symmetrically from the two biological sexes; the male body takes on a masculine gender identity and the female body takes on a feminine gender identity. Butler's point is that neither sex nor gender is prediscursive, because the conceptual content of "sex" is determined by the social and historical understanding of "gender". The difference between man and woman is thus not fundamental. Categorizing men as men and women as women is trivial, but it becomes non-trivial however, when biological categories are interpreted *through* gender. As we have seen, Crowley's gay characters behave according to a feminine social gender although belonging to the male biological sex. This implies that we transfer a set of cultural habits, behaviors and interests on to a biological category and consider that category a fundamental standard. And as a result, "gay" comes to be seen as a self-evident category of identity.

By acting out their sexuality with feminine gender-roles, Michael and his friends do not justify nor challenge the biases of a binary system though, they rather illustrate the restrictions the binary system puts on them. It is the presumptions towards their assumed

[153] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 73.
[154] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 9.

essence that becomes the basis, not only for dominant society's construction of homosexuality, but for their own construction of themselves as homosexuals. The boys "perform" gay in a feminine way not only because they deviate from the standards implied by their biological sex but because they have internalized the expectations of femininity from hetero-normative society, as a cultural standard for gay behavior.

Ironically though, Michael points out early in the play that people have different standards, and if we (homosexuals) don't accept that, "we're just as narrow-minded and backwards as they think we are"[155]. This refers to how Michael assumes heterosexuals think of homosexuals, but does it also imply what Michael thinks of homosexuals himself? Michael and his gay friends clearly have ideas about what society expects of them and their "sexual identity". This is represented both in how they speak of themselves and through how they speak of Alan, the heterosexual. At his arrival to the party, Michael makes it clear that he wants the others to submit to acceptable social behavior:

> MICHAEL: (...) to pop that balloon now just wouldn't be fair to him.
> LARRY: Whatever's fair.
> MICHAEL: (*Crosses to* DONALD). Well, even you have to admit it's much simpler to deal with the world according to it's rules and then go right ahead and do as you damn well please. You understand *that*, don't you? [156]

Alan does not know about Michael's true sexuality, and Michael does a good job hiding it from him, remaining closeted to his straight friend. And the fact that they act differently with Alan present, a representative of the public domain and the heterosexual society, suggests that they behave differently due to the cultural hetero-normative standards and presumptions towards their sexuality. It also suggests that the boys have submitted to these presumptions and that their idea of how Alan would react reflects how they see themselves as well. The binary system with its categories then arguably does not only imply how we see the people within our own category, but as Mary McIntosh asserts, the problem with polarization of normal versus deviant is that it generates categorization and labelling, which again is often a self-fulfilling prophecy.[157] In other words, categorization has a mirroring effect; when people inside one category say how they are seen from the people outside this category, they also say something about how they see themselves. The labels put on these men are self-fulfilling; they are seen as effeminate, and they act effeminate. They are seen as deviant, and so they act as though they are deviant by attempting to "behave" in front of the heterosexual majority.

[155] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 16.
[156] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 22.
[157] Mary McIntosh, "The Homosexual Role," *Social Problems* 16:2 (1968): 184.

Emphasizing this notion is Emory's ambiguity towards his "label". He refuses to *act* in front of Alan, and he underlines his effeminacy when he explains how he was in charge of the decorations for his high school prom and that "it takes a fairy to make something pretty"[158]. Ironically though, when he is on the phone with Information later in the play, he wishes that they would stop calling him "ma'am"[159]. Why is it acceptable for the men inside this category to identify each other with the feminine social gender or effeminate stereotype, and not for people outside this domain to do the same? We will get back to this later, but for the moment recognize that Michael also makes this paradox visible. He is provoked by the generalizing prejudices heterosexuals have towards gay men, but still judges Alan by the same means of measure, when he says that "movie star gin" is "too faggy for Alan"[160]. He suggests that the drink is too feminine for a heterosexual man, and so he too then generalizes one type of characteristic to be valid for an entire sexual category, and thus this category is seen as a self-evident identity. Thus, as we have seen, the binary system restricts interpretations of identity to a view based on polarization of male versus female and normal versus deviant. Importantly though, it is also a double-edged sword as it both helps us categorize and generalize people around us, and shapes how we see ourselves as well. Within this binary system, the boys are not able to produce a sense of self that is not informed by a pathological discourse, and they are not able to produce a distinctly gay identity without confirming peoples' prejudices of gays as effeminate and deviant. To the extent that the play is able to place its text within a discourse of identity politics then, it is merely through the discourse of essentialism. When homosexuality is seen as completely defining the subject as we saw above, it merely repeats the discourse of the binary system and hetero-normative society. Eventually, as I will explore below, the text demonstrates that homosexual identity can only be established from the available discourses.

2. Reproduction of Discourse: Homophobia and 'Stereotypia'

According to Foucault, language does not so much reflect as construct social reality. He asserts that it is misunderstood as a medium through which we express our "true selves". But our private, interior self, he suggests, is rather constituted through language and not vice versa.[161] Although this view shows that language is interwoven in how the subject is

[158] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 81.
[159] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 78.
[160] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 70.
[161] Mortensen, *Kjønnsteori*, 75.

constructed, he fails to challenge the concept of the self as a coherent unity. Gay Liberationists too failed to challenge this, and that is why these gay characters, even though out of the closet and openly and proudly gay, cannot expect acceptance in society for their sexuality as long as they maintain the discourse and the subjectivity that is expected of their deviancy. Even though they proudly shout out their sexuality, this is not the same as shouting out "who they really are". Maintaining that will also maintain the essentialist idea of the subject as a coherent unity, in exaggerated terms, a subject that is nothing more than his or her sexuality.

In line with this, Foucault argues in his book *The History of Sexuality* that the sexual liberation we have taken for granted during the last century is in fact no liberation. He claims that our current discourse is still a power mechanism, because it has not developed separately from the power regime itself, but rather as a means for its execution.[162] His claim is that because we use more language and have extended our discourse about sexuality, we assume this to be liberating, when in fact all we have done is to use more language to say that we are still repressed. He asks:

> Why do we say that, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most resent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed?[163]

As in Edward Albee's play, the language of Crowley's characters becomes highly important. The characters in *Boys* are depicted merely through their lines in the play. As the evening unravels, Donald, Harold, Emory, Hank, Larry, Bernard and Michael get caught up in conversation about their sexuality and their sexual preferences. Elicited by Michael's cynical truth-game, the boys embark upon a night of confessions about their lives and loves, resulting in much humour as well as emotional outbursts. Although this might seem to suggest openness and liberation within the group though, the more they speak, the more they submit to their individual stereotype.

New York Times drama critic Clive Barnes reviewed the play in 1968, and claimed in opposition to Dennis Altman that Crowley gives a truthful picture of homosexuals:

> [He] takes the homosexual milieu, and the homosexual way of life, totally for granted and uses this as a valid basis of human experience. Stanley Kauffmann, in a perceptive but widely misunderstood essay, pleaded for a more honest homosexual drama, one where homosexual experience was not translated into false, pseudoheterosexual terms. This I think The Boys in the Band, with all its faults, achieves.[164]

[162] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 42.
[163] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 19.
[164] Barnes, "The Boys in the Band", 1.

Even though I agree that a positive development is visible in Crowley's play when he allows his characters to be openly gay on stage, he is not able to depict them with any viable identities to the same extent as Tony Kushner is with *Angels in America*. To this end, Gay Liberationist Altman interestingly argued that *Boys* was a play of self-hatred, and with gay stereotypes no homosexual would take seriously.[165] We meet Michael, a gay man ashamed of his sexuality partly due to religious reasons; the flirtatious Larry, who has a fundamental need for multiple lovers; Hank who realized his sexual identity late in life and left his wife and kids, the hyper-feminine Emory; and Harold, who always spends hours in front of the mirror before he goes out. Of course one might say that this is one of Crowley's moves to show us variations of homosexual men with their distinct features. However, it arguably rather points to categorization and 'stereotypia' at work. This seeming variation rather shows us extremes of gay identities, and confirms people's preconceptions and stereotypes of homosexual men as effeminate, shameful and promiscuous. Accordingly, the boys in many ways confirm Foucault's prediction. Talking about sexuality does not open up the categories, nor does it liberate the people within the different categories from cultural expectations to gender as long as it uses a mainstream, hetero-normative language. It merely confirms the categorizations, and ensures continued repression.

Butler also sees a great problem with our current sexual discourse. As she points out, discourse itself limits gender analysis, because it already contains a set of aspects we evaluate as presumptuous to any gender analysis: "The limits of the discursive analysis of gender presuppose and pre-empt the possibilities of imaginable and realizable gender configurations within culture"[166]. Her claim is that because these limits are always based on a binary view of sexuality, the issue of whether gender and sex is fixed or free, will always be determined by the possibilities within such a system. As hetero-normative interpretations of identities are so woven into the way we see sexuality and gender, our language maintains this system as well. This notion becomes apparent already in the first scene of the play, when Donald and Michael discuss a bottle of hairspray. The label on the bottle says "control for men", and Donald points out that it would still be hairspray even if they had called it "balls"[167]. In a humorous way then, Crowley shows us how language is part of the way we categorize. Using hairspray might be seen as feminine, and so the hair spray company has chosen to use the word

[165] Altman, *Homosexual: Oppression & Liberation*, 38.
[166] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 11.
[167] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 6.

"control" instead, in order to appeal to the male gender. Although this might seem satiric, the fact that these gay men have no problem using hairspray and mock the men who do, does not just satirize the problem of a language that supports the binary system, it also shows how these men are part of that very system themselves because Crowley lets them use hairspray without hesitation, precisely *because* they are gay.

William Scroggie also asserts that Crowley's struggle to represent homosexuality in a new, more liberating way, is due to the limiting discourses at hand.[168] But as Foucault claims, it is not only the current discourse, but the way we reproduce this discourse that caters for continued repression. This notion becomes apparent in the play as well, through Crowley's use of the minority/majority relation. Using the sceptical and somewhat demeaning Alan as a representative for the heterosexual society and the male sex, Crowley ensures that the audience will sympathize with the homosexuals. Alan reacts with disgust when he learns the true sexuality of the other men, and his homophobia peaks with his gay-bashing of Emory:

> ALAN. (*lashes out.*) Faggot, Fairy, pansy…
> (*Lunges at Emory, grabs him, pulls him off stool to floor and attacks him fiercely.*)
> queer, cocksucker! I'll kill you, you goddamn freak! FREAK! FREAK![169]

To the audience then, Alan is shown as the majority, repressing the sexual minority. Ironically though, as Alan is the only heterosexual in the play, does he become the true minority of the play? If so, this might justify his reactions to some extent, especially because of Michael's growing hostility towards him as the party moves into its second act. Additionally, this change of roles allows Crowley to challenge our ideas of repression. Who is supposed to take the blame for sexual repression? Does the majority have to own up to everything, or does some of the responsibility lie with the minority?

As mentioned, the depiction of this group of friends with a shared sexuality might have seemed tempting to many homosexual readers when the play was first produced. The internal humour and the many references to common culture such as the plays of Williams and Albee give a "sense of camaraderie, of belonging to a group" as some homosexuals have pointed out.[170] As Stonewall marked the beginning of publicly displaying homosexuality, it also tended to argue for liberation through the notion of homosexuals as a legitimate minority. However encouraging this atmosphere may have seemed to homosexuals at a time when homophobia was still highly present though, is the atmosphere Crowley creates in fact

[168] Scroggie, "Producing Identity", 249,
[169] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 45.
[170] Schiavi, "Teaching the Boys: Mart Crowley in the Millennial Classroom", 77.

positive? According to Michael Schiavi, establishing a gay community relies as much on discourse as on physicality.[171] Complicating the relationship between these boys then, is the fact that their interaction is in fact rather demeaning. Their discourse - the satiric comments, the harsh tone and the name-calling - might be seen as a sign of friends close enough to use demeaning words for each other and sarcastically joke about one another's sexual orientation. This much resembles the way black people might call each other "nigger" and use racial jokes within their own groups as signs of belonging. (Accordingly, it also becomes evidence to how Gay Liberation was highly inspired by the African-American civil rights movement and their activism for acknowledgement as a minority). Turning the use of a pejorative into something positive is what inspired the Stonewall slogan as well: "We're here, we're queer, get used to it"[172]. However, as pointed out earlier, once someone from without this group uses these pejoratives, it is not well received.

Although intended as positive then, the boys' behavior is rather disrespectful, because they confirm the stereotyping, the prejudices and the repression they meet elsewhere and which they strive to erase. And it underlines how they have internalized the homophobic language of their oppressors. The closeness intended by the debasing thus rather becomes a symptom of a minority group seeking togetherness because of one shared interest and from being social outcasts. Being gay brings them together, but that does not necessarily result in true liberation. Their discourse rather implies that homophobia is so well established, that they not only mimic it, they reproduce it, confirm it and thus contribute to their own repression. Fixating on one another's presumed gay features will not lead to sexual liberation and establishment of a gay identity, but rather increase homophobia. Because even if Crowley's "outing" of gay characters refutes assimilationist strategies, he relies on a tactic that shows the existence of a minority vastly different from mainstream American culture, but in a marginalizing or ghettoizing manner that only helps build the wall between a gay subculture and the society as a whole.

Moreover, the characters' sharing tone is well in place with the new Gay Liberationist reliance on shared experience over medically informed help in dealing with homosexuality. This was supposed to be enabled by acts of coming-out and from consciousness-raising. The thought was to pronounce your sexuality until it was no longer shameful.[173] For each of the characters, pronouncing their sexuality and discussing it among their friends is clearly

[171] Schiavi, "Teaching the Boys", 78
[172] Gill Valentine, "Queer Bodies and the Production of Space," in *Handbook of Lesbian & Gay Studies*, ed. Diane Richardson and Steven Seidman (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 155.
[173] Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 38.

important for them. If we look at Donald and Michael's attempts to deal with these issues however, it becomes clear that they are not able to do it in a way that ensures positive development or a healthier self-conception.

Donald's biggest personal issue seems to be his inevitable sense of failure. He does, as we saw above, blame his parents for this, and so he maintains a pathological discourse. In addition, he expresses a sense of being disqualified from the bourgeois society and the lifestyle Michael and the others lead, and his strategy for coping with this is through failing on purpose. He quits college and limits himself to taking cleaning jobs. William Scroggie points out that one could see this strategy as an unwillingness to accept the norms and values of dominant society, but that it seems more like a cowardly retreat than a confrontation.[174] Michael on his end seems to see this as Donald's own fault: "Nobody holds a gun to your head to be a char-woman. That is, how you say, your neurosis"[175]. However, Donald does not have any more of an opportunity than Michael to construct a subjectivity that is not informed by the available discourse. Accordingly, his "failure" might more appropriately be read as the failure of homosexuality to represent anything other than what a hetero-normative discourse gives room for. And with all the self-hatred implied throughout the play, the play does not seem to provide a representation that is similar to anything the Gay Liberation might recognize as *pride*.[176]

Adding to the sense of self-loathing and internalized homophobia in the play is the cynical truth-game. It is a game of coming out, and is part of Michael's hateful attempt to get a confession from Alan on his closeted sexuality. What becomes apparent instead though, is how Michael tries to use this game as a defence for his own inability to accept his "condition" because he lashes out at the others in an attempt to cover his own shame and insecurity. And Harold accurately catches him in this effort:

> HAROLD: …You are a sad and pathetic man. You are a homosexual and you don't want to be. But there is nothing you can do to change it. Not all your prayers to your God, not all the analysis you can buy in all the years you have left to live.[177]

Here, Harold points out Michael's shame towards his sexuality, implying also that it is imposed by his religion. And according to Harold, Michael's inability to accept his sexuality cannot be helped by psychoanalysis. Towards the end, after his emotional outburst, Michael

[174] Scroggie, "Producing Identity", 246.
[175] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 11.
[176] Also argued by Scroggie, in Scroggie, "Producing Identity", 246.
[177] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 99.

confirms Harold's description. As he does, Michael not only addresses the core of his own self-hatred though; he also echoes the core of Foucault's argument: "If we…if we could just…learn, not to hate ourselves so much. That's it, you know. If we could just not hate ourselves just quite so very very much"[178]. Sexual repression's biggest problem is that we constantly agree to be repressed. Michael has realized this as well, that hating yourself will get you nowhere. But Michael has apparently not learned enough. For at the end, he is not only unable to accept himself, but it also becomes clear that he fails to evolve in his understanding of Alan:

DONALD:	Why do you think he stayed, Michael? Why do you think he took all that from you?
MICHAEL:	(…) Who knows? What time is it?
DONALD:	(…) Michael, did he ever tell you why he was crying on the phone – what it was he had to tell you?
MICHAEL:	No. It must have been that he'd left Fran. – or maybe it was something else and he changed his mind.[179]

Going from a mean game of trying to make Alan 'come out', he goes back to the state of conciliatory and unknowing from Act One. And fittingly, there seems to be no development for any of the boys in the course of the play. Harold goes home with the Cowboy; Alan, whether being an extremely closeted homosexual or not, ends up going back to his wife, dismissing the life of the boys; Donald ends the evening on a drinking-binge; and Michael has gone back to drinking and ends up having an anxiety attack before he goes to a midnight mass, underlining his need for forgiveness for his "sinful" sexuality and his own unwillingness to accept it. Crowley mentions as a sarcastic comment to closet plays of the 50s that "It's not always like it happens in plays, not all faggots bump themselves off at the end of the story"[180], but to call his a happy ending is pushing it too far.

However deep the conversations then, there is no true liberation for these boys. Their gay identity is not only stereotyped within their own circle of friends, it is given no viable alternative in the play. However much they argue, cry and speak, the characters are still depicted as self-loathing, and so the play does not seem to offer any way out of an identity that is based on the hetero-normative discourse and its expectations toward their "deviant" sexuality.[181] Repeating the discourse of a homophobic society will only ensure internalized homophobia. And fitting to this sense of reproduction, as the play ends, none of the characters have developed a positive self image or shown a positive progress.

[178] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 102.
[179] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 103-104.
[180] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 65.
[181] Timothy Scheie, "Acting Gay in the Age of Queer: Pondering the Revival of Boys in the Band," *Modern Drama* 42 (1999): 11-12.

3. Social Transformation or Ghettoizing?

So far, we have seen how the boys' freedom is restricted by a binary view on sexuality and a hetero-normative discourse. What hope then, if any, do these boys have of forming an identity that is not interpreted in terms of pathology or as stereotypically "gay" when the discourses available are highly hetero-normative? The campy tone and the effort made to create an atmosphere of belonging attempts to do this, but the characters fail to construct positive self images that are not informed by reproducing the homophobic discourse of dominant society. What is lacking then, is the ability to challenge this discourse, through seeking social transformation.

When Michael and his friends become stereotypes, it is because they are as trapped in this power system as Crowley is. For even if we are dealing with a new representation with a discourse of identity, Foucault writes, it is still a power mechanism because it has not developed apart from or outside of the power regime; it merely speaks differently. It brings sex to the surface, and forces its discursive existence as a mechanism for its projection; constantly observing, classifying and formulating the individual.[182] If, however, we were to do something about this system – to find a possibility for individual identities freed from these regimes, could Michael and the other boys have a chance of an identity freed of traditional discourse, freed from the biases of the binary system? Foucault does not seem to think there is a possibility for such freedom;

> If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility – without even knowing either what it's form will be or what it promises – were to cause them to crumble (…) then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea.[183]

What Foucault seems to say here, is that human beings and their specific sexual identities are products of culture and constructions of history. We have power mechanisms such as the binary system and the current discourse to help classify and identify individuals. If then these mechanisms were to be eliminated or washed out, as we saw in Chapter One, the human being as we know it would be washed out as well. With a Foucaultian view then, the boys have little hope of liberation. By denying the human being though, Foucault holds an extremely negative

[182] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 31- 42.
[183] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 387.

attitude towards humanity that causes him to deny any responsibility or will to change. He does not provide any hope of a subjectivity liberated from these power regimes.

If we look at Larry's character however, a vague but important social critique, as Scroggie also recognizes, can be seen in his final promise of fidelity to Hank. This is not necessarily a sign of defeat or adhering to cultural, hetero-normative values of monogamy like film critic Joe Carrithers sees it. Initially, Larry feels that having to make a promise to Hank of his fidelity will deprive him of what he sees as the "freedom" to be with anyone he wants. In this sense, Carrithers' argument is understandable. However, when he changes his mind in the end of the play, it is not a sign of giving up his freedom. Carrithers sees this as a sign that Hank and Larry ultimately give up, and settle for a monogamous relationship which "removes the sexual freedom celebrated by gay rights activists"[184]. On the other hand though, Larry's jealousy of Hank and Alan suggests that he does not necessarily practice what he preaches so to speak. He claims not to want fidelity, but still reacts with jealousy to Hank's connection/flirtation with Alan. And thus, in his decision to give up his prior sexual ethos also lies a decision to cast a way his stereotyped label as a promiscuous homosexual with an essential need for multiple lovers. Accordingly, his decision to try and be faithful to Hank is also arrived at from a freedom of choice.

Moreover, Carrithers claims that the truth game illustrates most clearly how *Boys* affirms and privileges heterosexual norms because the married Alan, and Larry, who finally commits to one person and thus adheres to a monogamous relationship similar to marriage, emerge as winners.[185] With such an attitude though, Carrithers seems to say that gay men are not prone to stable monogamous relationships. Gay Liberation worked for this sense of sexual freedom because it challenged the Pre-Stonewall assimilationist ideas. In the long run though, such "freedom" is not very fruitful as it gives little room for character variation. It demands promiscuity, and thus it limits the opportunities for variations of gay identities which is exactly what they wanted to challenge.

Even though the play illustrates Foucault's view of reproduced discourse and the limitations of available discourses, there is a problem with Foucault's dismissal of the subject as the only solution. For every time he sees cultural constructions, he sees power mechanisms. Cultural constructions however, are not necessarily negative. At least Foucault owes the reader an argument for this position. One could say that such a view on social mechanisms is

[184] Joe Carrithers, "The Audience of *The Boys in the Band*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 23:2 (Summer 1995): 69.
[185] Carrithers, "The Audience of *The Boys in the Band*", 66-67.

a consequence of a misinterpretation of the concept of freedom. The example with Larry shows us that people are free when they legislate their own laws, not when they eliminate these mechanisms or standards of behaviour and lose themselves in un-reflected desires. Therefore, social mechanisms may constitute a possibility for freedom, if the standards for behaviour are not hetero-normative, or based on a binary view, but are disrupted to allow variation. This is not to say that power mechanisms are not important or are not deeply entrenched in society, just that elimination of the subject as constituted by power mechanisms or social systems is not the solution we should seek. Rather, a social transformation in terms of changing the social power mechanisms seems favourable.

Fitting to this context, another attempt at a social critique can be seen in Michael's change of strategies. The assertion of homosexuality as a politicised identity and the insistence on the validity of gay-inflected knowledge were both enabled in the liberationist model by an act of coming out and consciousness-raising. Coming out was seen as a "potent means of social transformation"[186]. We have seen how the characters are unable to translate their issues into a social critique because they merely reproduce a heterosexist discourse. However, Michael does grow more critical towards the public domain in the second act. Before Alan shows up, Michael tries to rationalize his choice not to come out to Alan by reasoning that Alan is not ready for it, or that it is easier to "deal with the world according to its own rules"[187]. What becomes problematic for Michael, however, is that Alan does not seem to accept the most openly gay character, Emory. And with Alan's increasingly homophobic reaction to him, Michael on his side turns increasingly angry towards Alan. At the end of Act One, serving as a climax in the play, the fight between Alan and Emory becomes a test of Michael's construction of homosexuality as well.[188] Apparently, his attempt to play by the rules of dominant society was not sufficient. Because as Alan, a representative of dominant society, lashes out and attacks Emory, any chance for Homo/Hetero harmony based on tolerance and respect is crushed. Alan comes out of the situation as the oppressive force, Emory as the repressed individual. And for Michael, the situation seems to make him realize the fallacy of his prior logic, as he is completely immobilized by it and also starts drinking at this point.

Michael emerges as stronger in Act Two though. He seems to understand that more should be required of dominant society. Accordingly, Act Two provides a more effective

[186] Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 38.
[187] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 22.
[188] Scroggie also makes this argument in Scroggie, "Producing Identity", 248.

critique of Alan and thus of heterosexual society as a whole. As we will see in Chapter Three, sexual repression will not end without social transformation. Whether Michael understands this fully or not, he does attempt to test Alan's views throughout the second act. When he finally comes out to Alan, he shows how his logic is reversed, and he also adapts the central strategy of Gay Liberation to confront others with your sexuality. This strategy was not just seen as important for the individual to be able to cope with his or her sexuality; it was seen as vital to achieve social change as well. If this is in fact accomplished is unclear though.

Michael attempts to educate Alan by coming out, by persuading Hank to come out, and finally by attempting to get Alan to confess to being gay as well. When Michael explains Hank's true sexuality to Alan, he says it in a harsh, critical tone: "I'll explain it. (…) Although I doubt it'll make any difference. That type refuses to understand that which they do not wish to accept. They reject certain facts. (…) Alan…Larry and Hank are lovers"[189]. Alan reacts with disbelief, but his tone becomes calmer before he leaves, and he eventually apologizes to Emory for the attack. And even if Alan ends up dismissing the life of the boys and returns to his wife, the fact that Michael tries to provide a more socially directed critique is an important development. Michael's strategy to play according to the rules of the world did not suffice and according to Butler, only when gender is recognized and theorised as an oppressive system of classification, both hetero and homosexuality come to be understood as merely artificial categories. By attempting to shift the attention on homosexuality towards a social matter rather than a personal problem, Crowley's play is able to express this important development in gay politics.

In this sense, Crowley's play is step closer to affirm a Butlerian, if not queer sense of identity. Like Foucault, Butler also claims that both gender and sex are culturally constructed. On the other hand though, Butler offers an alternative, a way out of a restricted identity that does not include eliminating the subject. As opposed to Foucault, she sees the possibility of disrupting the established discourse and binary view of sex and gender through social transformation while keeping the subject. In *Gender Trouble*, she asks an interesting question: "is unity necessary for effective political action? Is the premature insistence on the goal of unity precisely the cause for our more bitter fragmentation?"[190]. She claims the unity-strategy to be one of the fallacies of contemporary feminist debate. Even though establishing a gay identity and to seek liberation through the notion of a sub-cultural unity can be politically efficient, it risks ghettoizing and categorization of homosexuality as an exclusionary norm of

[189] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 74.
[190] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 21.

identity that rules out the possibilities of complex, differentiated identities. Without this unitary aim however, one could make room for more people for whom the meaning of the category is permanently disputable. And so, even though the boys in this band are interpreted as isolated, self-loathing homosexuals then, Butler's ideas of gender might still represent a road to liberation – a way out of a role you do not feel is yours - a way into a subjectivity where your sexuality does not define your entire identity.

What finally places Crowley as less radical than both Albee and Kushner in my opinion though, is his inability to provide a full social critique of the oppression of homosexuality. The name of the truth game becomes telling to this end. Michael calls it "The Affairs Of The Heart" and asserts that in affairs of the heart there are no rules.[191] With this logic however, Michael (and the play itself) returns to the strategy of presenting homosexuality in terms of personal identity, a strategy that fails to consider the extent to which sexuality is governed by social mechanisms. This rhetoric is repeated until the end of Act Two. With what might be a last attempt to educate Alan on the harmlessness of homosexuality, Emory explains to him that what Hank and Larry are doing in the bedroom is not hurting anyone. According to Scroggie, his argument shows how his language "operates within the discourse of the dominant culture – which denies that sexuality is a social issue"[192]. And within this discourse, Emory echoes the assimilationist strategies that Stonewall was a move away from. What becomes clear here though, is that to fight oppression of homosexuals, it is not sufficient to rely on assimilationist or ghettoizing tactics if they do not change the social circumstances. No more efficient is the attempt to establish a consistent gay identity, especially when this identity is arrived at from the same essentialist and heterosexist view as homophobia. In Crowley's play, this attempt merely created stereotypes. Until Michael and the other characters start challenging the cultural construction of homosexuality and disrupt the available discourses, liberation will not be possible.

In this chapter, I have argued that the characters try to establish their identity in terms of a distinctly gay identity. What becomes evident instead though, is that their identities are informed by a binary view of sex and gender, and by pathological discourse of the pre-Stonewall period. And so eventually, the play demonstrates that identity can only be built from the available discourses. Unfortunately, the boys merely repeat and reproduce the homophobic discourses of an oppressive society. In Crowley's play, this reproduction results in the maintaining of a ghetto-culture which failed to affect the dominant culture. What is

[191] Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 71.
[192] Scroggie, "Producing Identity", 249.

lacking then, is the means to challenge and transform these homophobic discourses. Importantly, Crowley made clear how what is wrong in the play mirrors what was wrong in its historical context. But as I argued in the third part of this chapter, it does not help to act out(ed) if dominant society is not transformed, and if strategies affirm ghettoizing instead of activism to change that society, liberation is an unlikely result. Finally, Butler's idea of performativity suggests that instead of the inefficient attempt to establish a gay identity as the "the core of one's being", like Crowley articulates it, in essentialist terms of sexuality and gender, the boys could find liberation, not by accepting and reproducing their "condition", but by performing gay as they prefer. We will see the importance of the possible liberation through such performance in the next Chapter, as well as the efficacy and necessity of social critique.

CHAPTER THREE

After Stonewall: A Queer(ing) Tomorrow with *Angels in America*[193]

"AIDS is both a destroyer and a creator of community. (...) Those in the margins, unless united in resistance, die. (...) The struggle against AIDS teaches us death, if faced, can be transformed; even cruel, unjust death can be transformed into a resource for the living, of a coming into justice and power".

Tony Kushner[194]

As we saw in Chapter Two, with the post-Stonewall Gay Liberation movement also followed a search for new theoretical ground on which to represent homosexuality in terms of identity that did not rely on essentialism. In the wake of Queer theory and Butler's critique though, homosexuality, like heterosexuality, comes to be understood as the product of social practices – not as a signifying essence of the self. Butler's rigorous reconstruction of identity then is in stark contrast to the liberationist models that affirm identity, promote 'coming out' and proclaim homosexuality under the organizing effect of 'pride', and marks the emergence of theorizing identity as un-fixed and changeable. In line with this, I will argue that Kushner too employs a queering strategy in depicting his characters and themes.

I will first argue that gender definition is shown as ambivalent and self-conception as changeable and incoherent in Kushner's play. Similarly, all the homosexual characters are "Other" in several ways, as the cast includes people who are gay, Jewish, Mormon, black, drag-queens, low-class, etc. Accordingly, Kushner not only places homosexuals at the center of his play, he queers gay male identity in that its shown as changeable, constructed through various features (not just sexuality) and thus he also avoids criticism against Queer theory for focusing only on sexuality. Moreover, I will argue that Belize's character exemplifies how gender is a performative category and importantly, his character offers a challenge to presenting the homosexual as a self-evident category of identity. Secondly, I will argue that Butler's theory of Abject Bodies achieves significance in the play, in that the abject bodies in the play gain new meanings and become bodies that matter. Importantly, this illustrates how materiality is important in the construction of identity. Even though the rise of Gay Liberation helped present homosexuality in a more liberating way through an increasing focus on gay

[193] Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (New York: Theatre Communication Group, Inc., 2007).
[194] Bob Blanchard, *Playwright of Pain and Hope*, interview with Tony Kushner, The Progressive, Copyright October 1994, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1295/is_n10_v58/ai_15783415/ (accessed April 20 2009).

history, gay culture and identity, this development ground to a halt with the homo-political agenda around the HIV/AIDS epidemic.[195] With the outbreak of what was seen as a "gay virus", the post-Stonewall period was in for a big change. Due to the emergence of Queer theory and the AIDS-outbreak then, one began to question and resist identity categories and their promise of unity and political effectiveness. I will argue that the public discourses that present AIDS can easily be compared to those who present homosexuality, in that both serve to oppress and abject the sick and homosexual body. Continuing his queering move though, Kushner allows his protagonist to find a new identity that is not sick, instead of reproducing his abjection. In the third part, I will show that because so many homosexuals died before national government would even comment on the disease, the AIDS epidemic ensured that gay politics became less concerned with identity matters and more concerned with real change for concrete individuals.[196] Here, I suggest that this development in the post-Stonewall politics is represented by Louis' character. His journey goes from Stonewall-politics of abstract freedom to realizing the vitality of the material body in a queer(ing), corporeal politics.

1. I I I I – The First Person Plural

Queer theory differs from earlier gay studies in that it is not based on homosexuality as a more or less given identity. It challenges any theory that depicts identity as stable and aims to redefine it completely, so that it can be analyzed as unstable, changeable and performative.[197] One side of the criticism against Queer theory reads that the social practice of queering can, as with homophile or heterosexist social practices, lead to a reproduction of the categorization of binary oppositions. In the previous chapter, we saw how this reproduction resulted in the creation of a ghetto-culture which failed to effect the dominant culture. Kushner's gay characters range from Belize, an openly gay, extremely effeminate ex-drag queen to the extremely closeted, masculine, not to mention homophobic, Roy Cohn. But importantly, Kushner goes beyond the fallacy of merely depicting variations of gay male identities (which often wound up creating stereotypes, as in Crowley's play) and attempts to show the differences and changeabilities *within* the individuals as well. He does it through ambivalent

[195] Jørgen Lorentzen and Wencke Müleheisen, ed., *Kjønnsforskning: en grunnbok* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2006), 137-138.
[196] Atsushi Fujita, "Queer Politics to Fabulous Politics in *Angels in America*: Pinklisting and Forgiving Roy Cohn," in *Tony Kushner: New Essays on the Art and Politics of the Plays*, ed. James Fisher (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 114.
[197] Mortensen, *Kjønnsteori*, 290

discourses – with showing self-conception as something that is not coherent or self-evident. By placing the homosexual Other at the center of his play and making it his focal point, Kushner's play queers gay male identity.

When it comes to homosexual and gender identity in the play, Louis' character illustrates its contradictory tendencies in an interesting way. He comes across as very ambivalent in his self-conception, the reason being perhaps that whenever we get a glimpse of him, we seem to learn about his politics rather than his personal life. As a hardheaded liberal, he is openly gay, but his sexuality is not something he makes explicit in behavior or speech. In his first scene of the play though, Prior accuses him of butching up around his family but still revealing his sexuality through his sibilant s-es. These character traits are supposed to define him as homosexual, and even though they probably say more about Prior's definition as he is the one using them, they also suggest a general relation of Louis to a male gender role. This is vague but visible throughout the play, as Louis continues to play masculine, especially in scenes when coupled with the very effeminate Belize.

Importantly though, Kushner has given Louis a name that may be used as both a male and female name. This works to underscore the ambivalence in Louis' gender identity. Moreover, Louis' sex is not determined in the character descriptions, and so when reading the play, one cannot determine his sex until the stage direction for scene four of Act One includes a parenthesis that says that Prior "hugs *him*"[198]. Interestingly, Prior points out the dual function of Louis' name too, when he mocks Louis for getting "closety at these family things"[199], and in keeping with this referring to himself as 'Lou' in front of his family, using a more masculine version of his name.

Louis also visualizes himself as a woman when retelling the story of Prior's ancestors to nurse Emily:

> Mathilde stitched while William the Conqueror was off to war. She was capable of…more then loyalty. Devotion. She waited for him (…) And if he had returned mutilated, ugly, full of infection and horror, she would still have loved him (…) and she would never, never have prayed to God, please let him die if he can't return to me whole and healthy and able to live a normal life…If he had died, she would have buried her heart with him. So what the fuck is the matter with me? [200]

Of course, Mathilde is in the same situation as Louis, their lovers being in danger and in need of a loyalty, love and support. In this sense, one could say that Louis merely relates to her personal conflict, but he also makes sure to underline her gender over eight times in this brief

[198] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 25.
[199] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 25
[200] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 58.

story. Moreover, he has no problem relating to her even though she is a woman, something that he underscores when he realizes what Mathilde was capable of and he is not, exclaiming: "what the fuck is the matter with me". In butching up in front of his family on the one hand and relating to the female Mathilde on the other then, Louis seems to identify both with men and with women. Accordingly, Kushner is able to show how gender definition does not follow symmetrically from either biological sex or sexual desire. In queer spirit, identity is thus shown as an incoherent category, with confusion and instability as important characteristics.

Joe Pitt's character provides the only coming out narrative of the play, and is also a good example of how identity is not a self-evident category. Being Roy Cohn's protégé, Joe has learned the importance of power, the potential of the law without morality. What he cannot adopt though, is Cohn's ability to live contentedly with the contradiction of being homosexual and at the same time seeing himself as a Reagan supporter, and a Mormon. In Reagan's politics which Joe affirmatively agrees with, there is no space for the homosexual. Neither is there in his religion.[201] When confronted by his wife and asked if he is a homosexual then, his answer is indirect and vague. In addition, it seems 'closety', given by a person who has suffered much to keep his sexuality a secret:

> No I'm not. I don't see what difference it makes (…) Does it make any difference? That I might be one thing deep within, no matter how wrong and ugly that thing is, so long as I have fought, with everything I have, to kill it. What do you want from me? (…) More than that? For God's sake, there's nothing left, I'm a shell. There's nothing left to kill.[202]

Here, Joe not only expresses self-hatred and frustration of living this unbearable contradiction. Simultaneously, he points to two contradictory views of homosexual definition. First of all, he asserts a view that sexuality is insignificant, and that it is his behavior that eventually becomes important for him and to his relationship with his wife. This view then echoes Butler's idea that gender is performative, and that one's sexuality should not be regarded as defining a stable or essential gendered identity, but as an enactment. Coming from a closeted gay however, this view seems incompatible, as Joe's performance is not at all liberating for his identity. Quite the opposite; he performs heterosexual although being gay, a notion that keeps him caged and burdened by the struggle that has caused him to become nothing but "a shell". Joe's reasoning then points him as rather incoherent when it comes to self-conception.

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[201] Clum, *Acting Gay*, 316.
[202] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 43, 46.

Secondly, in his answer one can also trace an essential view of sexuality. His language alludes to his sexuality as something that lies within him, a core of truth he has fought and tried to kill. Again then, this is incompatible with the insignificance of sexuality he expresses at first. Because if he has had to kill it, to fight it with everything he has, and its death leaving him empty, his sexuality becomes his entire interior self, his whole identity. Again then, identity is shown as a limiting category when spoken in essentialist terms, and the favored view of homosexual self-conception is shown as ambivalent rather than fixed.

With this ambivalence still present, Kushner moves to the scene where the second death sentence takes place. In frenzy over his newly received death sentence, Roy lashes out at his doctor for implying that he is homosexual. Coming from this closeted, mean-spirited man however, his explanation of his own sexuality emerges as quite interesting. As with Louis' and Joe's self conceptions, Roy's too is characterized by ambivalence. First of all, he defies his doctor's need to put things into words, to label and categorize. This also echoes Butler's warning against identity discourses that repeat the hetero-normative matrix. What he goes on to say though, raises an interesting question that can be applied to identity politics in general. He explains to his doctor what labels really refer to:

> You think they tell you who someone sleeps with, but they don't. (…) They tell you one thing only: where does an individual so identified fit in the food chain? Not ideology or sexual taste, but clout. That's what a label refers to. Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men, homosexuals are men nobody knows and knows nobody, homosexuals have zero clout. *What* I am is defined entirely by *who* I am.[203]

Rightly, Roy points out how society categorizes based on sexual labels. What Roy seems to do here though, is to argue that *who* he is politically, a powerful shark-lawyer, should the basis for his identity, not his sexual taste. Kruger argues that this suggests how taking a political position is shown as "an act of self-identification not unlike the claiming (…) of a sexual identity"[204]. Although this reading is plausible, Roy's attempt to assert his political identity as more significant than his sexual identity fails. His doctor still recognizes him as homosexual, because he knows he sleeps with men (as he has treated him for sexually transmitted diseases before). And so even though he argues that sexual identity is just a label, his doctor as well as one of the members of the disbarment committee ultimately see him as a "faggot" which illustrates that Roy cannot choose not to be identified as such by society. For as Butler argues, gender is compulsory. And one cannot avoid the public discourses of

[203] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 48.
[204] Steven F. Kruger, "Identity and Conversation in Angels in America," in *Tony Kushner: New Essays on the Art and Politics of the Plays*, ed. James Fisher (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 153.

identity. But as she explains, subversion of sexuality and gender can be possible when the discourses producing their coherence is challenged.[205] In other words, if Roy had attempted to assert his political identity and sexual identity as parts of the same Self, he would be able to be a shark lawyer, a mean cynic with "clout", and still define himself as homosexual. With his homophobic construction of homosexuals though, this becomes impossible.

The shifting gender roles and ambiguous self-conception within the characters, helps Kushner to put forth his queering mission. It shows the instability and changeability of identity, as self-conception does not necessarily follow symmetrically from sexuality or gender. As I will argue next though, his characters are marked not only as Other, but with multiple othernesses which emphasizes Kushner's queer spirit as his characters illustrate the multiplicity of self.

Queer theory is often criticised for neglecting the role of class, race and ethnicity in matters of identity. The general concern seems to be that a lack of specificity characterizes queer theory (and similar theories which strive to reach a wide audience through perspectives that in themselves are broad and all-consuming) and thus it fails to acknowledge the different analytical tools needed to discuss for example race and religion. Quoting José Muñoz's *Disidentification*, Hall writes that "a soft multicultural inclusion of race and ethnicity does not, on its own, lead to a progressive identity discourse"[206]. What Queer theory does contribute with though, is the tools for a deconstruction of identity discourses and categories in general. With the inclusion of the gay, black, ex-drag queen nurse Belize, Kushner arguably avoids this criticism, as Belize becomes the embodiment of an ultimate Otherness and multiple othernesses, and thus shows how queering can be efficiently applied to any category such as race or class. Belize's own self conception, again, becomes interesting in this sense.

Belize is perhaps the campiest character in the play. But although speaking French in a campy tone throughout the fifth scene of *Millennium Approaches*' second Act with Prior, when Prior tells him "Je t'adore, ma belle nègre", Belize disapproves: "All this girl-talk shit is politically incorrect, you know. We should have dropped it back when we gave up drag"[207]. Here, the discourse between the men reveals internalization of the language of an oppressive hegemonic culture, both when it comes to sex (girl, queen) but also when it comes to race (negre). Although this sort of repetition of oppressive language provided humour in

[205] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 42-43.
[206] Donald E. Hall, *Queer Theories* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 92.
[207] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 67.

Crowley's play, his characters did not realize its harm. Belize however, points out their own internalization of oppressive language by commenting that their girl-talk is politically incorrect. Moments later, within the same scene, Belize also gets the chance to comment on class difference. When done nursing Prior, he sarcastically says, "If I wanted to spend my whole life looking after white people I can get underpaid to do it"[208]. Being a nurse in the US apparently doesn't pay too well, and with this line Belize has been able to point to yet another feature of his "otherness", namely his working class position. Moreover, referring to white people, his comment also alludes to a sense of otherness deriving from race. Finally, at the end of the scene, one last aspect of Otherness is being commented on. Prior's answer to Belize's underpaid-comment is simply to call him a Christian martyr, and thus he brings in a religious aspect as well. With all these factors being mentioned in the course of one scene, Kushner is able to fuse identity markers such as sex, race, class and religion within his most sympathetic character, and thus avoids the critique of Queer theory for only being concerned with sexuality.

Continuing to establish his queering mission, Kushner uses Belize to emphasize the value of 'queer' over 'heterosexual'. When introduced to the cynical Roy, Belize seems to be the only one who can handle this stubborn, mean man. A patient at his hospital, Roy is in fact at the mercy of Belize. Still, Roy keeps offending him, calling him names, and for some reason (even unknown to Belize), Belize offers him his hand. Belize gives him medical advice, explaining the "double blind" of the placebo-effect medications the doctors will try to give him. When Roy asks why he should listen to Belize over a "qualified WASP doctor", Belize's answer shows him as both sympathetic, and also his motive places queer at the center: "He's not queer, I am (…) Consider it solidarity, one faggot to another"[209]. Queer becomes the predominant term here in the opposition of straight/queer. Kushner thus not only deconstructs the binary of heterosexual/homosexual;[210] with Belize's comment though, Kushner is also able to put queer in the valued position, showing its predominance in this context as superior to a WASP, and as the reason for bringing Roy in on a secret that will vastly decrease his pain and extend his life. Queer theory has also been criticised for being just as exclusionist as the categorisations they aim to challenge, as some assert the queer exclusion of the heterosexual. Belize's statement might be read to show how queer can come to represent just another category, which excludes the heterosexual and includes only the non-

[208] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 67.
[209] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 160-61.
[210] Hall, *Queer Theories*, 62. Hall explains that Derrida shows how deconstructing the position of heterosexual as the valued, predominant term, will reveal how it is dependent on the secondary one, i.e. homosexuality.

conformist. However, I contain that Belize rather functions as Kushner's mouthpiece for a queer utopia that includes all – not just the queer.

During the next scene with Roy and Belize, this sense of Belize being Kushner's mouthpiece emerges. First, Roy announces Belize as his "negation"[211]. Roy being the representation of the highly oppressive McCarthy regime, a homophobe, and a firm believer in the value of the masculine, American heterosexual over the effeminate, the black, and the homosexual, Belize thus becomes again a sign of the ultimate Other, a role Kushner seemingly wants us to recognize as important. Secondly, Roy is about to die in this scene, and so he asks Belize what it will be like "after". Taking the role of Prophet almost, Belize describes it to him:

> BELIZE: Like San Francisco. (…) a gray sky full of ravens. Prophet birds, Roy. (…) And voting booths. (…) And everyone in Balenciaga gowns with red corsages, and big dance palaces full of music and lights and racial impurity and gender confusion. (…) And all the deities are Creole, mulatto, brown as the mouths of rivers. (…) Race, taste and history finally overcome.[212]

Belize compares heaven to San Francisco, a city often thought of as a place where different groups of people seek freedom from the oppression they meet elsewhere, such as gay subcultures. Moreover, Belize uses words normally associated with negative notions such as impurity and confusion in describing his idea of utopia or paradise. And so, these words are given new meaning as positive and good. This subversion of language is a very queer move, and moreover, proclaiming racial and gender mixture as part of heaven, Belize becomes not only an embodiment of Otherness, but a mouthpiece for a queerer future where gender and race do not follow the earthly, hetero-normative hegemonic discourse. We will come back to this later, but first see how performativity also becomes an important queering strategy for Kushner, as he uses it to illustrate the fluidity of identity and its subversive potential.

Being the most effeminate character of the play, Belize can be said to identify with the female gender rather than the male gender. His language is campy from the start, he calls his gay friends girls and queens, and refers in a campy tone to William's play, imitates Audrey Hepburn, and the fact that he is an ex-drag queen only helps to underscore his" campyness". What this distinction between anatomy and behavior suggests though, as with the other characters we saw above, is a distinction between a biological and social gender, where the biological gender becomes the supreme, most "real" gender. Mentioning Belize's former

[211] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 208.
[212] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 209-210.

profession though, allows Kushner to comment on this distinction in a way that can be linked to Butler's ideas of performativity as well.

Butler uses drag as an example of performativity in *Gender Trouble*.[213] Citing Esther Newton, she points out how drag says "my 'outside' appearance is feminine, but my essence 'inside' [the body] is masculine." Importantly, the opposite becomes true as well: "my appearance 'outside' [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence 'inside' [myself] is feminine"[214]. In the first chapter, I argued that George was able to perform masculine by positioning himself as the Subject. Here however, Belize's anatomy being masculine while his behavior/outside is feminine, might lead one to ask: which is more real? Being a former drag queen does not contradict this, but underlines that the opposite can also be true for Belize; that he performs female to express his 'inner truth', while his 'exterior or outside' is really masculine, underneath all the make-up. As effeminate and campy on one side, and biologically male on the other, following Butler, it becomes clear how none of these gender roles, masculine or feminine, can be said to be Belize's "truth". Rather, his character is constituted as a queer character, one that is not female, not male, but queer. Importantly, Butler does not see gender as non-existent, she sees gender as compulsory and produced through discourses of heterosexual compulsion and hyperbolic versions of male and female.[215] Belize has quit his drag-days, which suggests the role of drag is something he has chosen, and effectively can choose not to perform as well. Importantly however, Butler famously asserts that there is no I before the marks of gender, and so performativity should not be understood as a way out of gender roles, but rather as a means by which we can attempt to disrupt a heterosexist gender-system.[216] As such, drag may work to illustrate how gender is produced, and subversively disrupt the very system it is produced by. As she explains: "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency"[217].

Belize's character tends to be neglected in many critical readings of the play. But as we have seen, his role can be said to embody a myriad of "othernesses" (as both gay, drag, and black), and thus carries great importance for the queer implications of the play. Moreover, his role as drag queen points to Butler's ideas of performativity, a notion it seems Kushner wants to emphasise. Because performativity is also present in another, interesting way.

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[213] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 174.
[214] Esther Newton quoted in Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 174.
[215] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 231.
[216] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 98, 232.
[217] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 175.

Kushner's directions for the play include which actors should play what parts. He wants several of his characters to be played by the same actors. This almost works as meta-performativity, in that it is not the characters who perform, but the actual actors playing the roles of these characters also play other characters in the same play. The directions read that the actor playing Hannah should also play the Rabbi, Ethel Rosenberg and Roy's doctor Henry. The actor playing Belize plays Mr. Lies as well, the actor playing the Angel also plays Emily, Sister Ella and the woman in the Bronx, and the one playing Joe also plays Prior 2 and the Eskimo. Of course, as Butler points out, gender roles or identity categories cannot be subverted or performed differently as easily as theatrical roles, but nevertheless, Kushner is able to comment on the ideas of performativity in a way that proves both fun and efficient.

Critics have claimed that there is a demeaning notion behind this sort of double-casting in that Kushner's male characters can be played by women but never vice versa. David Savran, for example, claims that *Angels* critiques the very mechanisms that produce pathologized bodies, but that it also represents yet another pathologization and silencing of women. He sees the women of the play, Harper, Hannah and the Angel, as depicted in an oppressive manner and thinks the play's use of doubling merely reinforces the predominance of the masculine and argues that the cross-gender performances only works in one direction in the play.[218] Rightly, Savran points out that the actors playing Hannah, Harper and the Angel "take on a number of heterosexual male characters, while the male actors double only in masculine roles." As a result, he claims, *Angels* does not denaturalize gender, but rather, masculinity is depicted as "essence that others can mime but which only a real (i.e. biological) male can embody"[219]. What this reading does not consider though, is that the directions never say what sex the actors playing the various roles should have. Accordingly, the actors playing Hannah, Harper and the Angel could just as easily be played by men, as could the roles of Prior, Louis and Belize (etc) be played by women even though they do not have any female doubles in the play. Moreover, the actor playing Hannah has the most extra-roles. This means that she is present in the play more than the other actors. And although appearing in small roles, they are all important because Hannah, the Rabbi and Ethel all function as important messengers in the play. The other (earthly) woman, Harper, is not silenced either, in my opinion. She emerges as perhaps the most clear-sighted character and thus is raised above the others, together with the black, gay, ex-drag queen Belize. I will come back to this in the third

[218] David Savran, "Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How *Angels in America* reconstructs the Nation" in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*, ed. Deborah Geis and Steven Kruger (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 23.
[219] David Savran, "Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism", 23.

part, but for the moment make clear that she and Joe wind up changing roles. Joe eventually comes crawling back to Harper, weak and insecure, while Harper has developed into a more self-secure, confident woman. Underscoring her importance even further is the monologue that finishes *Perestroika* in which she repeats Belize's vision of San Francisco and joins his role as mouthpiece for a queer utopia where different souls are gathered and united, and together they are capable of reparation:

> Night flight to San Francisco. (…) As close as I'll ever get to the ozone. I dreamed we were there (…) But I saw something only I could see, because of my astonishing ability to see such things; Souls were rising, from the earth far below, souls of the dead (…) And the souls of these departed joined hands, clasped ankles and formed a web, a great net of souls, and the souls were three-atom oxygen molecules, of the stuff of ozone, and the outer rim absorbed them, and was repaired.[220]

Like Butler warns, subversive performances will always run the risk of repeating conventional forms of categorizations through "their repetition within commodity culture where subversion carries market value"[221]. But here, Harper takes the role of heroine as she changes places with Joe towards the end, and similarly, Belize with his ultimate/multiple otherness emerges as the hero as we saw above. Thus, the characters who are the most "othered" are not silenced, quite the opposite, they emerge as heroes and signifiers of great thematic importance.

With what I contain is a clear queer(ing) mission then, Kushner is able to present homosexual characters who have ambivalent homosexual definitions and inconsistent self-conceptions and thus he goes a long way to queer identity categories. With portraying his characters with not just a "deviant" sexuality, but multiplicity of othernesses, he also avoids to only focus on sexuality and importantly shows the individual, not as a coherent I, but as a first person that is plural. Sedgwick postulates that if queer is expressed in the First Person Singular, new, more personal voices can be recognized in Queer theory.[222] What becomes clear with the diversity between and *within* Kushner's characters however, is that if they copy the Angel's strategy of self-identification, "I I I I", they too can express themselves in terms of a more plural self, a more plural I.[223]

[220] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 275.
[221] Hall, *Queer Theories*, 75.
[222] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 9.
[223] Whenever the Angel (or other heavenly characters) presents themselves in *Angels in America*, they repeat I several times.

2. Abjections: AIDS and the Homosexual Body

Although moving away from fixed notions of identity was a liberating development, the AIDS epidemic ensured a shift in gay activism. It became clear that one needed to talk about the sexual body, not merely fluid notions of identity. The move away from identity politics was obviously necessary to contest the negligence met by politicians, but it also serves as an important answer to the criticism against Queer theory for being too fluid. The AIDS patients in the play Roy and Prior suffer from the same disease. Functioning as the antagonist and protagonist respectively, how these two characters handle their disease serves as an interesting way to see how Kushner challenges the abjecting AIDS discourse.

Within Queer theory, there is a strong reliance on gendered, sexualized bodies or subjects as discursively produced. Some of the criticism of Queer theory then, reads that it fails to acknowledge the importance of corporeal politics and the body as materially significant in the construction of identity. In this sense, although determining the body as discursively produced, Butler's theory on abject bodies in *Bodies that Matter* does not insist that the body is purely discursive, but merely claims that materiality can only be grasped through language. She explains how bodies come to matter in society, and explores how the corporeality of the body is controlled by various normalizing practices and how such practices lead to a whole realm of bodies that are not constituted in society as intelligible and valued - how they instead become abject bodies, bodies that do not matter.[224]

Ironically, it is the play's least sympathetic character who realizes the intelligibility of the AIDS body. Roy recognizes the strategies behind this; (American) society's normalizing strategy of abjecting sick bodies:

> The worst thing about being sick in America, Ethel, is you are booted out of the parade. Americans have no use for sick. Look at Reagan: He's so healthy he's hardly human, he's a hundred if he's a day, he takes a slug in his chest and two days later he's out west riding ponies in his PJ's. I mean who does that? That's America. It's just no country for the infirm.[225]

As Roy points out here, there is no room for the infirm because this threatens the stability of the general public's image of normality. This confirms Butler's argument on how AIDS is not only "figured as the 'gay disease', but throughout the media's hysterical and homophobic response to the illness there is a tactical construction of a continuity between the polluted status of the homosexual by virtue of the boundary-trespass that is homosexuality and the

[224] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 1-4.
[225] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 192.

disease as a specific modality of homosexual pollution"[226]. Accordingly, public AIDS narratives function to assign identities to these acts of "boundary-trespassing" that threaten the heterosexual fantasy.

As Roy rightly senses, the diseased, infirm bodies are devalued in American/general society. The public narration of AIDS during the 80s mirrors this sense, because as sociologist Cathy J.Cohen points out, it was structured through a logic of oppression in that bodies that are Other become marked and so dominant society can designate and repress them:[227]

> Because AIDS made visible and was made visible through homosexuals, iv-drug users, and prostitutes, HIV and AIDS were taken up through popular imaginary as "visible" evidence of secret and inner depravity, pathologized bodily acts, and corresponding identities. Although the identity-categories seem descriptive, self evident, and self-contained, what and who we see as well as how we see them are the effects of these received categories. That is, the identity categories function as optics (how, what, who we see) that enable and constrain our sense of morality, conduct, our selves and others; and by extension shape the cultural common sense of AIDS. [228]

With this logic though, the sick like the homosexual body will always be designated as Other to the norm of the healthy or heterosexual body. Cohen explores how corporeal identities are produced by modern logics of sex and race and how this shapes our understanding of AIDS. She claims corporeal identities "gain force through the complex political forces and conditions of Reagan and Bush America"[229]. She uses Reagan's family-values-politics as an example of how general public may become stabilized through normalizing practices, and how these practices tend to criminalize behaviors and sexualities that are Other.

Roy attempts to avoid this criminalization and abjection by pretending he is not sick. He still wants to be seen as healthy super-lawyer with "clout". In the third scene of *Perestroika*'s second Act, Roy is in great pain, but refuses to adhere to his publicly dispelled body or let it become part of who he is. He pretends to be ok, and holds his pain attacks back until Belize leaves the room. He treats his sick body in the same way as his homosexual body. By hiding it, he attempts to appear healthy and heterosexual. Paradoxically though, the people around him see him as the opposite, his body is still deemed abject by everyone else. The people around him regard him a sick person, and eventually the bar association takes away his clout by disbarring him, and as we saw above, he learns his own sense of his sexuality is not even intact, as one of his fellow lawyers calls him a "faggot". This confirms Butler's theory of

[226] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 168.
[227] Cathy J. Cohen, "Contested Membership: Black Gay Identities and the Politics of AIDS" in *Queer Theory/Sociology*, ed. Steven Seidman (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 281-283.
[228] Cohen, "Contested Membership", 283-284.
[229] Cohen, "Contested Membership", 283.

the discursive limits to the subject. It also goes to show how the body is constructed according to the heterosexual norm, and that if it is constructed according to a norm, it will simultaneously construct the opposite of this norm. Accordingly, Roy's body cannot be recognized as anything other than sick because there is no language to designate him otherwise, and because next to a healthy body, his body will be Abject.[230]

Roy's body is abject in three major ways (he is Jewish, homosexual and has AIDS), but because he tries to assimilate instead of contesting the abjection practices, he is not able to change the significance of his body. Butler's ideas of performativity do not say that we can choose freely what we are, as we put on clothes in the morning. We can however, act subversively so that we change the materialization of our bodies.[231] In this way, gender is not seen as completely fluid, as merely language or as non-existent, as queer theory has been criticised for postulating. Rather, the body can take on new meanings in a similar fashion as we saw with performing gender in part one. Similarly, an abject body can come to matter and avoid the criminalizing bonds put on it by normalizing practices if we change the norms behind the process that has determined them as abject. Because Roy serves as the play's antagonist, it is fitting that his strategies of neglecting his diseased body echoes the Reagan administration's tactics, and that he fails in trying to construct his identity as healthy and straight. If we look to the play's protagonist instead then, it might give more clues to Kushner's idea of efficient gay politics.

Although homosexuality is the focal point of the play and is not, as so often in pre-Stonewall drama, the major problem the characters have to deal with, it still can be said to put AIDS in this position instead. Because as the play opens, it seems Prior has internalized society's abjection of the AIDS body. This becomes clear in his first meeting with Harper in their mutual hallucination. He refers to himself as a "corpsette". According to Butler, Lasse Kekki notes, "subject formation requires identification with the normative phantasms of sex and gender, and according to Butler this identification takes place through a denial of *'abject bodies'* – bodies no one is supposed to identify with"[232]. Being a "corpsette", Prior's body not only becomes abject in that it identifies with the female gender although he is biologically male, he also refers to his body as a corpse - as dead - showing his internalization of the abjected AIDS body as insignificant, devalued and unintelligible. Moreover, it becomes clear that Prior's self-conception is informed by the strategy of abjection in a totalizing way when

[230] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 3.
[231] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 231-232.
[232] Lasse Kekki, *From Gay to Queer: Gay Male Identity in Selected Fiction by David Leavitt and Tony Kushner's Play Angels in America I-II* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003), 297.

he describes himself to his mirror-reflection: "I don't think there's any uninfected part of me. My heart is pumping polluted blood. I feel dirty"[233]. Prior regards his body as completely sick, and this example shows how the materiality of his body is vital for his identity or self-conception.

In opposition to Roy however, Prior learns to see his body differently. When the play opens he sees himself as a "corpsette" with "polluted blood" but he gradually comes to understand what the clear-sighted Harper tries to tell him in their mutual hallucination. She sees a part of him that is not inhabited by AIDS: "Deep inside you, there's a part of you, the most inner part, entirely free of disease. I can see that"[234]. When visited by the Angel, Prior thinks she is there to save him. He realises however, that the Angel is there to make him a Prophet. The entire second Act of *Perestroika* is dedicated to the retelling of the Angel's revelation to Prior, depicted through Prior's retelling of the event to Belize. The Act begins as Belize and Prior leave the funeral of a "major NYC drag-and-style queen"[235]. Importantly, Prior still struggles with his identity as a PWA[236], and comments on the abjection of AIDS patients as he explains how the funeral was "just a parody of the funeral of someone who really counted. We don't; faggots; we're just a bad dream the world is having"[237]. This serves as a criticism of the way in which homosexuals with AIDS were neglected by the public, and how they were not recognized as bodies "who really counted" due to the process of abjection. Importantly, this also illustrates that Prior is not yet able to designate his body as valued, but as he contemplates the meaning of the Angel's arrival with Belize though, it seems Prior becomes gradually aware of its purpose.

The Angel has given Prior the status of Prophet, and significantly, Kushner has emphasized the materiality of this. Traditionally, in biblical stories, prophets tend to be called at by the divine in spiritual ways, in dreams or as visions.[238] Initially, the Angel copies this tradition by naming him prophet through her divine powers: "American Prophet tonight you become". Additionally, she instructs Prior to "Remove from their hiding place the Sacred Prophetic Implements. Your dreams have revealed them to you"[239]. The mood turns quite comical when Prior says he has not had any such dreams. And so radically, Prior's deliverance is handed to him not only as a discursive imperative but in a sexual act that

[233] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 40.
[234] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 40.
[235] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 167.
[236] Person With Aids
[237] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 168.
[238] Annemarie de Waal Malefijt, *Religion and Culture: An Introduction to Anthropology of Religion* (London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1968), 241-242.
[239] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 171.

merges his body with the Angel's. Accordingly, Prior's body becomes significant in the process of establishing his new identity, rather than it being constituted fluidly through mere discursive acts.

Hesitant at first, Prior tries to dismiss his title, telling the Angel, "I'm not a prophet, I'm a sick, lonely man, I don't understand what you want from me"[240]. With some struggle though, Prior begins to affirm this new identity: "It's 1986 and there's a *plague,* half my friends are dead and I'm only thirty-one (…) Maybe I am a prophet. Not just me, all of us who are dying now"[241]. Prior's body continues to be important whenever the Angel arrives (For example, Prior can tell when she is getting close because it causes him to have erections) and so his diseased body achieve new meaning by incorporating it into his new found identity as prophet, rather than making his sickness his identity.

When Louis comes to talk to Prior after having left him and having started an affair with Joe, the change in Prior's self-conception becomes clear. Louis tries to hint that there are different ways to handle a deadly disease, and cynically comments that he left because Prior was "too much of a victim"[242]. Prior answers in a harsh tone that he knows that Louis is seeing someone. If he was a victim before, he is not anymore, and this is underscored by his furious but harsh comment to Louis: "Fuck you. I'm a prophet"[243]. Prior takes his new role seriously, and it is one that I see as asserting Kushner's mission: it offers him an alternative to being a PWA, through disrupting the abjection of his body instead of assimilating to the norm, as Roy attempted, he can continue to express his identity without reproducing society's abjection of him as homosexual and sick.

Moreover, the discourse here is still largely informed by associations to the body. Before leaving Louis, Prior questions the reality of the pain and remorse Louis expresses:

> PRIOR: Are you really bruised inside? (…) Answer me: Inside: Bruises?
> LOUIS: Yes.
> PRIOR: Come back to me when they're visible. I want to see black and blue, Louis, I want to see blood. Because I can't believe you even have blood in your veins till you show it to me.[244]

To Prior, the reality of Louis' pain is questionable until it shows on his body. Arguably, Prior has understood the importance of corporeality, while Louis still relies on his "theories" and

[240] Kushner, *Angels in America,* 179.
[241] Kushner, *Angels in America,* 181-182.
[242] Kushner, *Angels in America,* 216.
[243] Kushner, *Angels in America,* 216.
[244] Kushner, *Angels in America,* 221.

abstract notions of justice, law and freedom. And as we shall see, the concept of the material body remains important in Kushner's thematisation of liberation, and of his queer utopia.

3. Freedom: Corporeal Politics and Painful Progress

Set in 1985, *Angels* emphasizes the need to make politics more practical in the face of AIDS, i.e. less concerned with fluid notions of identity and more with concrete individuals. Many homosexuals were dying, and the Reagan administration did not address the theme until 25 000 were already dead.[245] Thus, it becomes clear that it was no longer sufficient to rely on abstract concepts of liberation either. Accordingly, gay activism became more politicized, and more concerned with concrete individuals in corporeal politics.[246] This shift is evident in the play, especially in the development in Louis' character. Starting out as a devout leftist and supporter of Hegel, he gradually comes to realise the importance of corporeal politics. When Louis abandons Prior, it is due to his idea of freedom. As Louis himself asserts, his world view is largely informed by Hegel. His ideas are judged by Prior as "very zen" which becomes understandable if we look at his idea of freedom. For as Krasner points out, his reason for abandoning Prior is "based on Hegel's abstract freedom detached from the flesh (…) Reality is to be considered, but only as a process. Thought rather than concrete reality is the ultimate goal, which can obtain 'freedom'"[247]. Louis' attempt at Hegel's notion of absolute, abstract freedom however, comes at a great personal cost – and as Krasner also notes, this is because he fails to acknowledge the materiality of the body, or the necessity to include corporeality in the politics of freedom. Accordingly, Louis' view can be said to represent the initial reliance of post-Stonewall theorists and activists on fluid notions of identity to ensure liberation.

As we've seen though, Queer theory's notion of the body as discursively produced should also lead us to ask how the body produces, shapes and construes language. The abject bodies that are present here should not be "left alone" so to speak, as is what Louis first attempts to do with Prior, but should be at the very center of activism and theory. Belize again comes to function as the wise guide (which he is in a very literary way for Harper as well, when he performs as Mr. Lies – the travel guide) and explains to Louis that he only has big ideas, and that they lack real value:

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[245] Fujita, "Queer Politics to Fabulous Politics in *Angels in America*", 114.
[246] David Krasner, "Stonewall, 'Constant Historical Progress', and *Angels in America*: The Neo-Hegelian Positivist Sense" in *Tony Kushner: New Essays on the Art and Politics of the Plays*, ed. James Fisher (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 105.
[247] Krasner, "Stonewall, 'Constant Historical Progress', and *Angels in America*", 104.

> BELIZE: (…) Louis and his Big Ideas. Big Ideas are all you love. "America" is what Louis loves. (…) Well, I hate America, Louis. I hate this country. It's just big ideas, and stories, and people dying, and people like you. The white cracker who wrote the national anthem knew what he was doing. He set the word "free" to a note so high nobody can reach it. That was deliberate. Nothing on earth sounds less like freedom to me.[248]

As Belize wisely observes, when freedom is put too high, nobody can reach it. For liberation politics to suffice, it needs to be available to all, and it needs to be related to concrete individuals. The fact that "Big Ideas" will not help ensure freedom became very explicit when so many homosexuals were neglected, deprived of help, and died during the AIDS epidemic.

Ironically, even though he is the most out-spoken critic of Reagan's right-wing politics, Louis is the one who struggles throughout the play with grasping the significance of the material body. He even adopts this administration's strategies during the AIDS crisis as he fails to acknowledge Prior's diseased body. After first seeking some kind of justification from the Rabbi for his abandonment, he apparently decides to try and stay with Prior for a while. What finally triggers his abandonment though, is when he has to face the sickness of Prior's body. Although in major pain, Prior does not want Louis to call an ambulance, because he realises that if he needs one, Louis will leave. And rightly, when Prior "*shits himself*"[249] as the stage-directions read, Louis breaks down: "This is blood (…) Oh help. Oh help. Oh god oh God oh God help me I can't I can't I can't"[250]. When faced with the reality of the sick body, Louis fails to incorporate this into his Hegelian sense of freedom, and so he abandons his boyfriend. And with neglecting his lover's disease, he also copies the failure of the Reagan administration to adequately deal with the AIDS crisis.

Not until he sees his own logic being used by those he despises, can he begin to see its shortcomings. Louis finally learns that there is a connection between his lover Joe and Roy Cohn, whom he previously called "the polestar of human evil"[251]. The fact that he has been with someone so close to Roy is unbearable to him, and so he lashes out at Joe for supporting this right-wing lawyer, which apparently is an unforgivable character flaw. In his confrontation with Joe about the court decisions he cooperated in exerting against a homosexual in the army who was cheated of his pension, he repeats the well-known line from the army/McCarthy hearings from 1954, in which the real Roy Cohn played an important role

[248] Kushner, *Angles in America*, 228.
[249] Kushner, *Angles in America*, 54.
[250] Kushner, *Angles in America*, 54.
[251] Kushner, *Angles in America*, 227.

as McCarthy's ally:[252] "Have you no decency sir? At long last? Have you no decency at all?"[253]. When Joe merely replies: "Free Country" it seems Louis now realises the fallacy of his own logic.[254] To use "free country" as an argument without attaching this freedom to anything material is not sufficient. The country is not free in and of itself, only if, as we saw with the characters in Boys, it is able to legislate its own laws, and these laws offer equal protection for every individual. In this case, freedom is used as an excuse for executing power, and so Louis begins to see how his logic of abstract freedom fails when it does not help free actual individuals.

As we saw in Chapter Two, Crowley's play illustrated how gay liberation lacked a proper discourse within which to speak its needs, and the limited discourses available to him ultimately made his play less politically efficient than it could have been. What becomes apparent here though, to the reader as well as to Louis, is the insufficiency of reducing freedom or liberation to abstraction. And to this end, the AIDS crisis proved an efficient turning point. Finally, Louis understands what Belize tried to tell him, that Big Ideas without "blood in them" are insignificant, and so he can be said to represent the development in gay activism and theory from relying on more fluid concepts of freedom to a more corporeal approach spurred by the AIDS crisis. For as Fujita urges: "It is necessary for gay people facing AIDS to be more politically active; waiting for subversion of hegemony by deconstructive analyses and performances is not enough"[255].

Again then, materiality becomes significant, and the importance of the body is illuminated by the fact that Joe beats Louis after the confrontation:

> (Joe pushes Louis, Louis grabs Joe. […] Joe slugs Louis in the stomach, hard. Louis goes to his knees, then starts to stand up again, badly winded.[…] Joe punches Louis again[…] Louis tries to hit Joe, and Joe starts to hit Louis repeatedly […] Louis sits up. His mouth and eye have been cut.)
>
> JOE: Can you open it? Can you see?
>
> LOUIS: I can see blood. (…) I just want to lie here and bleed for a while.[256]

As we saw above, Louis was confronted by Prior with the questionable reality of his bruises. Now however, Louis has not only realized the importance of corporeality in politics of freedom, but he has gained the real, bodily bruises that were the only sort of bruises Prior would accept. Louis has finally gone through *physical* pain, and so he begins to understand

[252] Clum, *Acting Gay*, 147.
[253] Kushner, *Angles in America*, 242.
[254] Kushner, *Angles in America*, 240.
[255] Fujita, "Queer Politics to Fabulous Politics in *Angels in America*", 121.
[256] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 243-244.

Prior's agony and thus moves away from his self-proclaimed Hegelian notion of abstract freedom.[257] The concept of the body and the concept of freedom are thus closely linked here.

Fittingly, change happens in *Angels* in a process that is painful, and also closely tied to corporeality, always borrowing its vocabulary from the body. The Mormon Mother in the diorama at the Mormon Visitor's Center makes this connection explicit. When Harper asks her how people change, she answers with a vocabulary and imagery largely informed by the body:

> God splits the skin with a jagged thumbnail from throat to belly and then plunges a huge filthy hand in, he grabs hold of your bloody tubes and they slip to evade his grasp but he squeezes hard, he *insists*, he pulls and pulls till all your innards are yanked out and the pain! We can't even talk about that. And then he stuffs them back, dirty, tangled and torn. It's up to you to do the stitching.[258]

As the Mormon Mother asserts here, change involves the body and it involves pain. Several characters in the play undergo some sort of change, and the materiality of these changes is always visible. For example, this imagery of bodily pain is taken up in Joe's sense of personal transformation. Before he comes out as homosexual, he talks about being someone else in terms of shedding his skin. He undergoes a major change as he decides to leave his wife. This change is no doubt painful; it is also closely tied to bodily experience, as his sexuality is the reason for his decision. However, Joe's change proves fragile and reversible. As the voice of Aleksii, the World's Oldest Living Bolshevik, opens *Perestroika*, he warns us that "If the snake sheds his skin before a new skin is ready, naked he will be in the world, prey to the forces of chaos. Without his skin he will be dismantled, lose coherence and die"[259]. For Joe, this seems to become his bane. In an effort to prove his love for Louis, he takes his clothes off, saying how this is his skin, and now he is "flayed. No past now"[260]. As Aleksii warned though, without a new skin available, he will lose coherence. And rightly, at the end of the play, he has not been able to change or go through a positive progress, as he ends up going back to Harper, pleading for her to take him back, emerging now weak and insecure. Dismissing ones past is thus shown as a bad way to move forward, as it only mimics strategies of assimilation and self-neglect. What Kushner also seems to say then, is that

[257] This is not to say that Hegel endorses a notion of freedom that is merely abstract. Although many people see him as an idealist, he still has as his main goal a sense of freedom that his highly pragmatic and closely linked to the material. But this is Louis struggle: To find out how he can incorporate a more practical view into his political idea of absolute freedom.
[258] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 211.
[259] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 148.
[260] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 206.

neither concepts of freedom or liberation is sufficient if it does not consider the material body or its past.

Accordingly, the change Louis goes through becomes important also because it makes it possible to forgive Roy Cohn. After his death, Belize and Louis are in Roy's room to steal his AZT medication to give to other AIDS patients. However mean he has been to Belize and however much Louis hates his McCarthyist politics and what he represents, the fact that they offer him forgiveness is important. Kushner has said he wanted to see how broadly a community's embrace reaches, and to see how communities today could let go of their past without forgetting its crimes.[261] For both Ethel Rosenberg and Louis, Roy represents an oppressive past. And so, as Fujita also points out, when the ghost of Ether Rosenberg and Louis chant the Kaddish over Roy Cohn's body, they show his behaviors as repulsive, but put it behind them as a symbol of their painful past.[262] What Kushner seems to show then, is that the past is not to be forgotten, but to be written into history as significant, as something to learn from and prevent in the future. The universality of this is illuminated by the fact that all the characters in the play can be said to belong to a minority that has suffered oppression and discrimination. Hannah, Joe and Harper are Mormons, Belize is black, Louis and Roy are Jewish – and all the men are gay.

Jonathan Freedman claims that this linkage of queer identities is a sexual one, and that the religious aspect does not work sufficiently, as he claims Kushner elides the Jewish side of the equation in favour of the Christian notion of future, through his Protestant imagery. Accordingly, he claims Kushner's notion of utopia falls into assimilationist strategies, as it seeks a "perfected version of its flawed predecessors, just as in the versions of Protestant theology adopted by American Puritans"[263]. However, the significance of oppressive pasts links "European genocidal history and America's homophobia"[264] as epitomized by AIDS, and thus rather underlines that instead of forgetting the trauma of the black or Jewish Diasporas, or oppression of homosexuals, this should be an incorporated part of who they are, and incorporated in the presentation of homosexuality in the future, so as not to let history repeat itself.

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[261] Clum, *Acting Gay*, 322.
[262] Fujita, "Queer Politics to Fabulous Politics in *Angels in America*", 118-120.
[263] Jonathan Freedman, "Angels, Monsters, and Jews: Intersections of Queer and Jewish Identity in Kushner's *Angels in America*," *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 113:1 (January 1998): 99.
[264] Ranen Omer-Sherman, "Jewish/Queer: Thresholds of Vulnerable Identities in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*" *Shofar: An interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 25:4 (Summer 2007): 82.

Finally, Prior's change in the play is also, as we have seen, tied to pain and the materiality of his body. His wrestling of the Angel and demand for "more life" proves important in this context, as well as to the play as a whole, because he defies the Angel's demand for "stasis". Fittingly, as the play ends, the unlikely group of friends is gathered around the Bethesda fountain, which represents healing and new life. In a happier ending than Crowley's play depicts then, Hannah affirms Kushner's pursuit of a queerer tomorrow when she points out their "interconnectedness"[265]. As I argued above, Kushner does not endorse a queer future that elides the heterosexual, but an "interconnectedness of all humanity, regardless of race or sexual preference"[266]. These characters have been queered as we saw above, and so Kushner's sense of utopia also emerges as a queer one, where diversity, multiplicity and interconnectedness are important features. Importantly, Prior the Prophet underlines this with a speech to all of us:

> This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come. Bye now. You are fabulous creatures, each and every one. And I bless you: *More Life*.[267]

Prior's final comment here ends Perestroika. Significantly, he asserts that the death of AIDS patients will not be forgotten, but instead work as a motivation for continuous struggle to gain more life. In this sense, Kushner's sense of Utopia is not queer in the substantive sense, he rather connotes a *queering* utopia that maintains a constant, active oppositional stand towards normative social practices. Change is proclaimed (as Queer theory does) but is not seen as easy or abstract form of process, but as painful and material. His comment then is at a clear distance from, but recognizes the struggle of, the assimilationist presentation of homosexuality in closet, pre-Stonewall drama. At the same time, as it is a big step forward from the gay pride agenda of Stonewall that continued to present homosexuality outside corporeal politics, it affirms progress in terms of "more life" and thus underlines the importance of corporeality in an active, *queering* tomorrow.

In this chapter I have argued that Kushner is able to queer homosexual identity through presenting homosexual definition as ambivalent and not self-evident, and identity as changeable and incoherent. He shows performance as an opportunity to act subversively and

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[265] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 278.
[266] James Fisher, "'The Angels of Fructification': Tennessee Williams, Tony Kushner, and Images of Homosexuality on the American Stage" in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*, ed. Deborah Geis and Steven Kruger (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997
[267] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 280.

disrupt normalizing practices of gender definition, and presents the I as plural. Moreover, he shows the oppressive force of abjection, and how this normalizing strategy works to neglect and devalue deviant individuals, such as the sick and the homosexual body. By letting his antagonist fail to avoid his abjection because he does not challenge the abjection discourses but letting the protagonist find a new identity, he shows how we might act to disrupt these normalizing practices. Finally, I argued that Louis' development represents the development in gay activism from abstract notions of freedom to corporeal politics of liberation for the concrete individual. And importantly, Louis' development becomes important as it enables him to forgive Roy Cohn, and thus Kushner makes an important comment to how we might present homosexuality in the future. In forgiving Roy Cohn but maintaining that he is a "son of a bitch"[268], the play shows how future presentation of homosexuality should incorporate the oppressive past of homosexual representation, and should not forget the painfulness of change and the necessity of corporeality in liberation politics. The struggle of AIDS, as Kushner claims, should teach us how unjust death can be transformed into a resource for justice, in a demand for freedom and a queer(ing) tomorrow.

[268] Kushner, *Angels in America*, 257.

CONCLUSION

I started this thesis by explaining what I have named Interpreted Identities, as how individuals tend to be read into categories of identities based on the idea that we constitute seemingly coherent features of sex, gender, and sexuality, and how individuals who deviate from this coherent norm, such as homosexuals, become interpreted as Other or deviant. My objective was to explore how (male) homosexuality is presented in the plays of Edward Albee, Mart Crowley, and Tony Kushner, to see if their plays show a liberating development in the presentation of homosexuality in American drama. Inspired by Judith Butler's question of "To what extent do regulatory practices of gender formation and division constitute identity, the internal coherence of the subject, indeed the self-identical status of the person?"[269] I found that for all three plays, it became apparent how the characters' self-conceptions is made accessible through, but also limited by, the available discourses. Accordingly, I maintain that a liberating presentation includes a move away from the notion of fixed, self-evident identity categories, into an understanding of the subject as polymorphous and not merely a sexual or gendered being, and that disrupting regulatory and normalizing discourses is vital to achieve material liberation.

Chapter One showed how the presentation of George and Martha as characters deviating from the heterosexual ideal, led critics before Stonewall to interpret them as homosexual. What this criticism illustrated though, is how deeply rooted essentialist ideas of gender or sexual identity was in the period before Stonewall. An important question was asked at the beginning of the first chapter: Can drama respond to the notion of identity as not destiny but a historical and cultural creation?[270] Even though critics in the decade before Stonewall read the play as a closeted homosexual play, Albee does this internally with his unconventional characters, and even quite explicitly, in George and Nick's discussion of biology and history. History becomes valued over biology, and performance and appearance are superior to biological "essence". And through the verbal and physical combat between the men, he shows how gender is a discursively produced and performative category. Rather than following in the tracks of the Homophile Movement and other closet drama playwrights then, Albee radically challenges essentialist and binary conceptions of sexuality, gender and identity through disrupting normalizing discourses with presenting ambiguous, unconventional gender roles.

[269] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 23.
[270] Vorlicky, *Act like a Man*, 2.

By also thematizing truth and illusion with ambiguous boundaries instead of as a polarized concept, Albee is able to point out the universal effects of the closet. George kills the son myth, reaches the marrow, and thus is able to tear down the facade and closet doors - kill the life-lie. And even if what lies underneath remains unanswered in many ways, the sense of nothingness at the curtain shows us the lack of an essence in the self. This provides an important voice to gay activism as well. As closet dramas tended to have as their aim to seek liberation for homosexuals, they showed individuals who were oppressed and could not live out their "true identities". The problem with the attempted liberation through such plays is their reliance on assimilation tactics. This is not to say that closet plays did not play an important role in gaining recognition for homosexuality in larger society, but that strategies that do not challenge normative social practices will arguably not provide liberation either. Accordingly, I read Albee's strategies as radical in a time when the favoured strategy to achieve homosexual liberation was through wooing dominant society with sameness. For *Who's Afraid* does not thematize oppressed individuals, but rather complicates the very basis for how we interpret sexed bodies into coherent norms for identity.

Stonewall altered gay activism, and gender and sexuality theory as well, toward a presentation of homosexuality in terms of identity. There is still a problem in how activists attempted to articulate this new "gay identity" in terms of unity however. As Butler warned after Stonewall, such unitary missions are argued based on the same logic as misogynistic discourses and discourses of essentialism, as it postulates coherence between gender and sexuality and identity. Accordingly, Crowley's play illustrates how the political strategies of early Gay Liberation and lesbian/gay studies were based on an understanding of the individual as constituting a stable homosexual identity and thus was in danger of repeating homo-hetero categorizations, contributing to rather than challenging the position of homosexuals as Other in relation to dominant society. I argued that the characters of Crowley's play, although "out and proud", still articulate their identities in terms of pathology. By looking at both Foucault and Butler's thoughts on sexual discourse, I argued that the characters' seeming openness about their sexuality rather ensured increased homophobia and contributed to their own repression, because they had internalized the hetero-normative discourse of their oppressors. Although underlined by the self-hatred connoted by Michael and the others, I argued that a Foucaultian view was a negative solution for freed identities, as he argues for an elimination of the subject as the only possibility for liberation from regulatory social practices.

Even if Crowley did not maintain an assimilationist manner of protesting though, he did rely on a tactic that showed the existence of a minority vastly different from mainstream

American culture, but in a ghettoizing manner that helps build the wall between this subculture and the society as a whole instead of challenging heterosexist social practices that define homosexuality as deviant. As Crowley in my opinion fails to provide a sufficient social critique of the essentialist and binary constructions of homosexuality then, his play is arguably less radical than that of Albee, even though positioned *at* Stonewall. *Who's Afraid* provides a more liberating presentation of homosexuality, because Albee is able to contest the normative equation normally reproduced in postulations after Stonewall of a distinctly gay identity of heterosexual: masculine and homosexual: feminine.

The strategies of promoting a gay identity shown in Crowley's play are based on a reliance that unity-argumentation will help liberation. Accordingly, I argued that the boys cannot be liberated with these strategies because, as Butler points out, it is not sufficient to rely on "unity" as it is based on the same idea that promotes essentialism for sex and gender. In the wake of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler's ideas and the emergence of Queer theory however, this reliance on unity was abandoned. One began to question and resist identity categories and their promise of unity and political effectiveness, challenge any theory that depicts identity as stable, and aim to redefine it completely, so that it can be analyzed as unstable, changeable and performative.[271] I argued in Chapter Three that Kushner does this quite explicitly. He establishes his characters with ambivalent discourses and incoherent self-conceptions, so that their identities are not seen as stable or easily defined, but as changeable and polymorphous. With what I argued was a clear queering mission then, Kushner is able to present homosexual characters with not just a "deviant" sexuality, but with a multiplicity of othernesses, thus he avoids only focusing (as Queer theory has been criticized for) on sexuality and importantly shows the individual, not as a coherent I, but as a first person that is plural. With these queering strategies, Kushner avoids essentialist and fixed presentations homosexual identity, and thus shows a liberating development in how we interpret identities.

The emergence of Queer theory also made visible the oppressiveness of social discourses. AIDS in many ways became a symbol of this, as it worked to abject homosexual and sick bodies alike. Thus, I argued that the play becomes politically important in the context of both the post-Stonewall AIDS crisis and current criticism of Queer theory, as Louis comes to represent the development in gay politics from a reliance on identity and fluid notions of liberation after Stonewall, towards a more corporeal approach spurred by the AIDS crisis. More importantly though, emphasising the need to disrupt such normalizing discourses to

[271] Mortensen, *Kjønnsteori*, 290.

ensure liberation, Kushner's protagonist Prior manages to establish a new identity that is not based on these discourses. Instead of reproducing his abjection like Crowley's boys and Kushner's antagonist Roy, he establishes a different identity with the status of Prophet. Importantly, I argued that Prior's Prophet-calling is handed to him both as a discursive imperative and manifested through a sexual act, so that his body becomes significant in establishing his new identity. Queer theory has been criticized for too fluid theorizing, but as Butler explains, by thinking the body as material, we can avoid traditional ways of describing the body in terms of something prediscursive or essential, and rather describe how regulative social practices determine what bodies become intelligible and valued, and what bodies become unintelligible and abject.[272] Accordingly, Kushner is able to challenge these discourses that constitute the homosexual and the sick body as devalued and unintelligible by showing how one might act to disrupt them. Thus, I argued that his play affirms a queering rather than a queer approach, which involves a continuous resistance to normalizing discourses.

One might assert that literature is always at some distance from corporeal politics and the material individual, and so it becomes questionable if a liberating development for presenting homosexuality found in theatre and drama constitutes material value. However, as theatre performances are available to popular culture in a way that allows from dramatic presentations of various roles, I cannot help but think that the stage can be an efficient place for presenting homosexuality. Importantly however, although theatre performances that show minorities can lead audiences to sympathize, I still maintain that in order for performances to *change* popular attitudes to, or ideas of, sexuality and gender, they need to disrupt hetero-normative discourses. When Kushner disrupts the abjecting discourses through his protagonist then, it is my opinion that his play connotes an improvement in dramatic presentation of homosexuality because hetero-normative discourses are no longer taken for granted, but challenged. And as his play shows how future representations of homosexuality should incorporate the oppressive past of homosexuality, towards an active, *queering* tomorrow, it illustrates a stronger focus on liberation for the concrete individual in more pragmatic and corporeal politics after Stonewall, that hopefully mirrors a liberating development in how popular culture interpret identities.

[272] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 2-3.

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